

# Exploring customer stewardship behaviors in service firms

Customer  
stewardship  
behaviors

Henry Boateng

*D'youville College, Buffalo, New York, USA*

Fortune Edem Amenuvor

*Department of Marketing, Namseoul Daehakgyo, Cheonan, Republic of Korea*

Diyawu Rahman Adam

*Faculty of Economic Sciences, Szent István University, Gödöll, Hungary*

George Cudjoe Agbemabiese

*Department of Marketing, University of Professional Studies, Accra, Ghana, and*

Robert E. Hinson

*Department of Marketing and Entrepreneurship,  
University of Ghana Business School, Accra, Ghana and Business School,  
Durban University of Technology, Durban, South Africa*

541

Received 16 September 2021

Revised 23 November 2021

4 February 2022

8 March 2022

Accepted 21 March 2022

## Abstract

**Purpose** – The existing literature has emphasized the importance of frontline service employees developing a sense of ownership for the overall well-being of customers. However, studies into why frontline service employees develop ownership and responsibility for customers are still lacking. The purpose of this paper is to address the question, “Why do frontline service employees engage in responsible customer service behaviors and protect the interests of customers in Ghana?”

**Design/methodology/approach** – A semistructured interview with 61 frontline service employees was used in the study. This study used a thematic analysis technique to analyze the data.

**Findings** – The findings show that frontline service employees develop a sense of customer stewardship because of organizational values, human resource management initiatives (rewards and in-service training) and ownership and accountability.

**Originality/value** – Studies on why frontline service employees engage in responsible customer service behaviors and protect the interests of customers is limited. This study addresses this gap in the literature.

**Keywords** Ghana, Customer stewardship, Service firms, Frontline employees

**Paper type** Research paper

## Introduction

Customer stewardship has been highlighted as one of the fastest emerging strategic enablers that businesses can rely on for differentiation competitive advantage (Singh and Tiwari, 2020; Schepers *et al.*, 2012). While there are several potential benefits for steward-oriented organizations, its realization takes deliberate internal strategic effort in cultivating an employee and organizational culture that enables such behaviors (Caldwell and Karri 2005; Hernandez, 2012). Customer stewardship is rooted in the idea of informed and committed employees putting organizational interest before personal interest in the execution of their roles (Hernandez, 2012). As a matter of fact, some successful global brands have been careful not to create only monetary incentivized employees but also ethical and



altruistic employees (Schepers *et al.*, 2012). Indeed, most successful organizations are finding that, on the employee motivation continuum, a fine balance must be achieved between the two (Krzeminska and Zeyen, 2017). Customer stewardship therefore has the ability not to only create an enthusiastic customer base but also offer customer delight and loyalty (Caldwell and Karri, 2005). The importance of stewardship behaviors is further highlighted by the Financial Reporting Council (2010), indicating that stakeholders that yearn for more responsible organizational behaviors across industries, consistently advocate for steward-oriented organization.

Although there have been some studies on customer stewardship (Schepers *et al.*, 2012; Donaldson and Davis, 1991), the reasons why service employees engage in customer stewardship behavior are not well understood. Accordingly, Schepers *et al.* (2012) advocate for research into how customer stewardship evolves over time. Similarly, Singh and Tiwari (2020) argued that more theoretical and empirical research into stewardship behavior is required. In response to these calls, our study seeks to answer the following research question: "Why do frontline service employees engage in responsible customer service behaviors and protect the interests of customers?" To address this research question, we draw on the stewardship theory, which states that in an exchange relationship, employees act morally and responsibly because it aligns with their moral beliefs (Torfing and Bentzen, 2020; Davis *et al.*, 1997).

While the current study acknowledges that prior research on customer stewardship has been done (Singh and Tiwari, 2020; Schepers *et al.*, 2012), it explores why employees develop customer stewardship. This study is also in response to Schepers *et al.*'s (2012) call by investigating customer stewardship from a qualitative perspective using data from the service sector in Ghana. It addresses the question using the stewardship theory (Block, 1993).

## Theoretical background

### *Stewardship theory*

Block (1993) defines stewardship as a set of principles and practices that allow for radical changes in institutional governance. It is about developing a governance approach that fosters a clear sense of ownership and accountability for performance at all levels of the organization. It entails cultivating a stronger consumer relationship and instilling self-reliance in everyone who encounters the company. Subramanian (2018), in keeping with Davis *et al.* (2007), surmised that stewardship is based on theories of psychology and leadership. They further argued that it is characterized as a representation of a psychological contract with an agent who is supposed to behave in a 'community-focused manner and lead to responsible moral behavior in the interest of the firm and its stakeholders. The stewardship theory suggests a type of collaboration between an organization's management and its stakeholders. Acting in the mutual interest of an organization's stakeholders has become a key component of organizational management.

According to Hernandez (2012), covenantal relationships can be traced back to stewardship. The concept of covenantal relationships implies that people develop a sense of implicit moral responsibility (Caldwell and Karri, 2005). Block's (1993) position is supported by de Ruyter *et al.* (2009), who argue that the theoretical source of stewardship is the insistence on communal objectives over self-serving interests. Dibrell and Moeller (2011) noted that managers are more involved in supporting the company's well-being and may point out that they are still very connected to the organization's identity. Organizational managers' interests are aligned with those of stakeholders. Managers should not benefit individually, but rather the organization (Hernandez, 2008). According to Falk *et al.* (2012), workers act in a cooperative partnership in the best interests of others because they believe that the moral duties of the relationship must always take precedence over individualistic or self-serving behaviors. Such behavior is

implicitly assumed to encourage employees to harmonize a competing strategic goal, considering actions that benefit the group rather than the employee. Furthermore, the firm's performance will improve. It is often argued that the structure of an organization influences the essence of the stewardship outcome (Hernandez, 2008). This is unsurprising given that all organizations operate in unique ways while adhering to some tried-and-true structures. Nonetheless, the fundamental assumption of the stewardship theory is that, individual interests should not become managers' overriding motivation; organizational and collective goals should be. Thus, emphasis is on cooperation and not desertion. Employees in a relationship sacrifice their interests and act responsibly towards others because such behavior is consistent with their moral beliefs (Davis *et al.*, 1997).

#### *Customer stewardship*

Customer stewardship refers to a frontline employee's sense of ownership and moral responsibility for the overall well-being of customers (Schepers *et al.*, 2012). Donaldson and Davis (1991) discussed stewardship and claimed that the perception of shared responsibility had a significant impact on serving customers responsibly. To a large extent, stewardship requires a mutual orientation that ultimately directs an organization to achieve its well-being (Dibrell and Moeller, 2011). Customers benefit from better services when shared orientations are well-coordinated. According to some researchers (Miller *et al.*, 2008), increasing face-to-face participation between employees and customers is necessary to ensure or strengthen good customer relationships and encourage customer stewardship. Hernandez (2008) reckons that the purpose of organizational actors is to consolidate their responsibilities to both internal and external stakeholders while maintaining a commitment to universal moral values. Although the employee is the most important internal stakeholder, it would be incorrect to assume that the customer is the most important external stakeholder. To satisfy these two distinct stakeholders, different marketing strategies may be required. Satisfying service customers requires that service employees develop stewardship behavior (Schepers *et al.*, 2012). The human resource literature indicates that organizational values, and culture (Pitelis, 2009), and rewards (Tuzovic and Bruhn's, 2005) are key to developing customer-oriented behaviors among employees. Also, relevant training and professional development programs help employees to acquire skills that help them to be customer-centric (Hafeez and AbdelMeguid, 2003; Hafeez and Aburawi, 2013). Although service marketing researchers have proposed customer-dominant logic (Gummesson and Grönroos, 2012), there is paucity of service marketing literature on why employees develop customer stewardship behaviors (Schepers *et al.*, 2012). Thus, examining why do frontline service employees engage in responsible customer service behaviors is important.

#### *Frontline service employees' behavior*

Frontline employees act as firms' agents when interacting with customers (Gruber, 2011) and influences customer relations (Gummesson, 1991). Given the characteristics of services, their roles are much more critical in the service sector. According to Bowen and Ford (2004), the critical role of frontline service employees should not be underestimated, as the company is responsible for providing a form of motivation to employees so that services can be provided with less difficulty to provide an exceptional service to the consumer. It is not a farfetched to say that the companies are frontline employees in the eyes of the customer. Their emotions can affect the manner they interact with customers in service encounters (Thrassou *et al.*, 2020). Suhartanto *et al.* (2018) add that, in addition to representing the organization, they play an important role in service encounters. Zeithaml *et al.* (1996) pointed

out that the interaction between the frontline employee and the customer is crucial for improved service delivery.

These positions are critical in determining whether a customer's outcome is positive or negative (Suhartanto *et al.*, 2018). Matthews *et al.* (2020) note that frontline service employees are the primary point of contact within the organization, putting them in a position to provide customers with authenticity cues. Similarly, Sirianni *et al.* (2013) contend that frontline service employee behavior contributes to a positive customer experience and a positive service perception. Because of the essential nature of their roles, frontline service employees must always act professionally (Gammoh *et al.*, 2014). Empathy, which represents the willingness to consider the emotions of others, has been argued as one of the qualities that frontline employees should develop to improve their professional behavior (Varca, 2009). Empathy can be expressed through emotions and positive gestures, which can help to create a positive customer experience (Lin and Lin, 2011). Liao and Chuang (2004) identified three antecedents of employee service performance in their study of factors affecting employee service performance: individual, store and service climate. They maintained that the individual level consists of the employee's characteristics, the store-level reflects human resource practices such as service training, and the service climate refers to employee views on the firm's general practices. For an employee to be accountable to their performance the right culture, leadership, systems and values are required (Pearson and Sutherland, 2017). To improve service performance, these elements must be successfully integrated. However, complications may arise because of communication between frontline employees and customers (Holmqvist and Grönroos, 2012).

## Methodology

### *Context of the study and method*

Several studies have been conducted to evaluate the behavior of service employees who interact directly with customers (Suhartanto *et al.*, 2018; van Tonder *et al.*, 2018). Their role and behaviors are critical to the success of any service because they can influence customers' perceptions of quality, value, and satisfaction (Brady and Cronin, 2001). Although some frontline service employees exhibit expected in-role and extra-role behavior (Schepers and van der Borgh, 2020), there have also been instances where they have mismanaged service delivery, engaged in unethical behavior, and mistreated customers. These actions have harmed the reputations of businesses (Schepers *et al.*, 2012). In response, researchers have proposed customer stewardship as a strategy for driving responsible customer service while also protecting consumers' interests (Homburg *et al.*, 2011). This study investigates why frontline service employees in Ghana engage in responsible customer service behaviors and protect the interests of customers during a service encounter. We used a qualitative approach to answer our research question. We were able to gain in-depth insights into the behaviors of frontline employees when interacting with customers thanks to the qualitative approach (Creswell, 1998). Furthermore, according to Creswell (2007), qualitative methods are appropriate for addressing "why" types research questions. Hence, our decision is justified since our research question falls within the why type of research questions.

### *Participants selection and data collection*

The 61 participants in this study were frontline service employees. Table 1 shows the participants gender and years of working experience. They were purposefully selected. The selection criteria were that the participant:

- works in a service firm (e.g. banks, restaurants and hotels); and
- interacts with customers every day at work.

The data were gathered through a semistructured interview. The interviews were conducted in English and lasted from 30 to 40 min. The interviews were recorded and transcribed with the participants' permission. Interviews were conducted at a university, as well as at the employees' homes and workplaces. We developed an interview guide for the data collection. We asked the participants to describe a time when they demonstrated stewardship toward customers and what accounted for those behaviors. We also asked the participants if they had ever purposefully caused a service failure and what might have caused such behavior.

Furthermore, we asked the participants to identify their role in ensuring that customers are satisfied and have a memorable experience. These and other probing questions helped us gain insight into their stewardship behavior toward customers with whom they frequently interact. To maintain confidentiality, we deidentified the participants and used pseudonyms such as Participants 1 and 2 to identify them.

### *Data analysis*

To address the research question, we used a thematic analysis technique to analyze the data. This analysis technique provides a flexible approach, allowing us to provide a rich and complex account of our data. We followed the six-phase thematic analysis approach proposed by [Nowell et al. \(2017\)](#): familiarizing with the data, generating initial codes, searching for themes, reviewing themes, defining and naming themes and producing the report. During the first phase, each interview transcript was given a name that represented an observation. Following that, we read through all the transcripts. In the second phase, we developed a code guide that defines the codes as well as transcript excerpts that support these codes (see [Table 2](#)).

In phase three, we followed [Saldaña \(2013\)](#) and we used Microsoft Excel to collate all the initial codes and listed the different codes identified in the datasets. This procedure helped us to have absolute control and ownership of the data and coding process. We searched for the frequent codes from the initial codes we have developed to develop the categories which were used to develop the themes. At this stage, we also merged similar codes. We also categorized the codes according to their similarities. This decision helped us to identified themes. For instance, we identified organizational values as a theme because most of the participants referred to the values of their organizations and described how those values had shaped their stewardship behaviors. It is important for us to state that, the codes did not have the same number of responses. The code that appeared most was values, followed by in-service training, rewards, ownership and accountability, respectively. Phase four began with a review of the themes we developed. Initially, we identified organizational values, training and development, rewards and ownership, and accountability as the themes emerging from the analysis. However, after reviewing them, we merged training and

Demographics	Total	(%)
<i>Gender</i>		
Male	27	44
Female	34	56
<i>Years of working experience</i>		
Below 2 years	3	5
2–5 years	24	39
6–9 years	19	31
10 years and above	15	25

**Table 1.**  
Participants'  
demographics

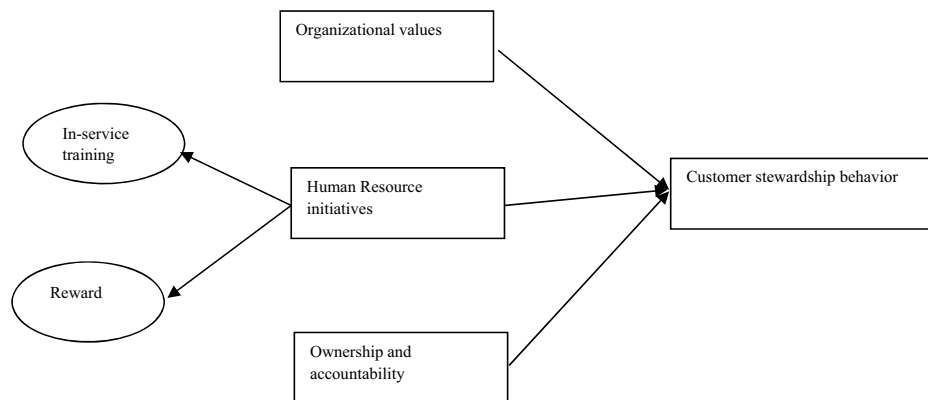
**Table 2.**  
Exemplars, codes  
and themes

Exemplars	Codes	Subthemes	Themes
<i>We are all guided by our company values and always ensure that the right things are done.</i>	Values		Organizational values
<i>All employees in my company work with this mentality that the customer comes first.</i>	Customer-first		
<i>the code of conduct frowns on acting against the interest of the company or acting in any way that brings the name, image, and company brand into disrepute</i>	Code of conduct		
<i>Management often provides training for staff to keep us updated</i>	In-service training	In-service training	Human resource initiatives
<i>Members of staff who act responsibly in such situations are rewarded financially.</i>	Rewards	Rewards	
<i>My colleagues and I took ownership of clients and wanted to please them in all ways possible.</i>	Ownership		Ownership and
<i>Management has put in place accountability structures that make every teacher responsible for his/her students' academic performance.</i>	Accountability		Accountability

rewards as one theme. In phase five, we analyzed each theme in detail and identified each theme’s story and how they relate to each other and the research question. We named the themes (training and rewards) we merged earlier in phase four as human resource initiatives and listed training and rewards as subthemes. [Figure 1](#) portrays a summary of the results. In the final phase, we wrote about the themes and used exemplars to support these themes. To select the best quotes to support the themes, we followed [Lingard \(2019\)](#): we ensured that the exemplars are illustrative of our arguments, they are succinct and represent the patterns in data. We also made sure that they fit into our arguments grammatically and rhetorically.

*Ensuring rigor and trustworthiness*

To ensure the study’s trustworthiness, we followed the procedure outlined by [Nowell et al. \(2017\)](#). The first was a prolonged engagement with the participants. We also used peer debriefing, which involved three authors analyzing the codes and themes before presenting the final themes. In addition, before the final coding and analysis, two members of the research team coded the data, compared their codes and refined them. Furthermore, we have



**Figure 1.**  
Summary of research  
findings

used excerpts of the transcripts to support the themes. Also, we tried as much as possible that ensured that our past experiences, and biases do not influence the interpretation of the results (bracketing) by restricting our findings and interpretations to the interviews. We also tried to minimize the impact of our preexisting thoughts on the analysis and interpretations of the findings as suggested by [Starks and Trinidad \(2007\)](#).

*Research findings and discussions.* Our research findings show that there are different reasons why frontline service employees develop and demonstrate customer stewardship. These reasons emanate from the firms and employees. We found organizational values, human resource initiatives (training and development and reward), and ownership and accountability as the reasons for the participants' engagement in customer stewardship behavior. These themes are discussed in the following paragraphs.

*Organizational values.* One of the essential principles identified from the data analysis is the importance of organizational value in customer stewardship. Organizational values shape service employees' behaviors and values. [Jain \(2020\)](#) mentions that values describe the ethical character of firms and further bring out what is worth pursuing. An organizational value provides the basis for creating principles and beliefs that guide the goals of the organization ([Gosendo and Torres, 2010](#)).

Some of the participants acknowledged that they had developed customer stewardship behavior due to their organizational values:

I think this is because of the organization's values. Our first value is: 'Valuing People.' We believe in treating people with courtesy and respect by listening and responding helpfully. (Participant 56)

Similarly, another respondent adds that:

We are made to understand that the client/customer is key to our survival in our industry because the client/customer markets our services and goods. This is our value as business organization. (Participant 7)

[. . .] for us, customer delight is the benchmark of all our services and all our endeavor as much as possible [. . .]". "[. . .] we believe customers are the most important aspect of our organizational chart and it is our pride to serve them right [. . .]" (Participant 43)

[. . .] are guided by our core values of integrity, professionalism, customer focus, results from orientation. (Participant 22)

These excerpts demonstrate that business organizations have established a significant organizational value to guide service employees. Values are vital in enabling strategies to be implemented more easily. It paves the way for everyone to act in a way that benefits the company in the long or short term. It promotes the acceptance of what is appropriate, acceptable and desirable and serves as a behavioral framework for members of an organization ([Calabuig et al., 2018](#)).

Firms attempt to achieve their desired goals by incorporating some identified organizational values. [Michailova and Minbaeva \(2012\)](#) state that top managers articulate, nurture and use values identified by the organization to shape employees' behavior to achieve an organizational goal. These findings suggest that the value of a service firm influences the customer stewardship behaviors of its employees. For instance, services employees imbibe stewardship behavior where customer focus is a core value of the firm. If service firms incorporate stewardship values in their firms, the employees will take care of the customer well by ensuring that they deliver customer services in accordance with the principles and practices of providing quality long-term services.

## Human resource initiatives

We found training and rewards as human resource initiatives that influence the participants' stewardship behavior.

### *In-service training*

In-service training allows employees to continuously improve their skill set while still on the job. Some firms continue to instill a sense of professional conduct when dealing with customers and other stakeholders as part of the training program. Bondar *et al.* (2020) contend that employee training and professional development is a critical practice in many organizations and a tool for strategy development. While training focuses on the short-term acquisition or expansion of job-related skills (Laird *et al.*, 2003), professional development is a longer-term strategy that includes the application of job skills in the workplace (Rusaw and Fisher, 2017).

A respondent mentions that:

[...] all employees of the institution I work with are trained and, as a result, expected to deliver refreshingly improved services to customers. Regular service training programs are conducted to keep employees up-to-speed with the service level requirements to ensure continuity of excellent service delivery. Additionally, service tip guides are circulated regularly through our intranet to serve as reminders [...]. (Participant 30)

Another respondent also adds that:

All employees have been trained to understand the organization's strategic pillar of ensuring the best customer experience to all our clients. The vision has been cascaded to all levels within the organization. (Participant 20)

Other participants further add that:

There are usually periodic training sessions that build the attitude of being responsible [...] I observe that the frequent training on customer service has motivated us to put in our best when it comes to customer service.

Every employee has been trained with the mindset that without the customer there is no business and as such all efforts are geared towards satisfying customer needs. (Participant 64)

The above extracts indicate that training and professional development have become the mainstay of several organizations. This is because it ensures continuity of excellent service delivery by the service employees. Indeed, the importance of training programs for service employees cannot be underestimated as it provides them with the necessary tools to meet customer expectations adequately. Saunders (2013) argued that services expectations might not be well understood from the beginning by a new hire; it is necessary to orient them to understand the expected services. This is done through training and professional development of the service employee. Through training, the firm has the unique opportunity to model the behavior of the service employees to meet the set standards.

### *Rewards*

The study further identified rewards as one of the reasons why employees engage in stewardship behavior. Bratton and Gold (2012) define rewards as any monetary, nonmonetary or even psychological payment that a firm provides to its employees in exchange for work (better service). Employees must see benefits in the promised reward, while the firm ensures that the reward has the potential to influence the desired behavior. Because of their inherent influence on behavior, rewards provide the ability to understand a firm's priority, particularly in

---

a multitask environment. The importance of rewards in service delivery was emphasized by the respondents. Some believe that when rewards are highlighted for certain types of actions or behaviors, some service employees demonstrate a high sense of responsibility at work:

The appraisal and rewarding system associated with it has made staff owners of the services they render to their customers. (Participant 49)

These findings suggest that, while organizational culture can promote customer stewardship, employees' customer stewardship behavior may be affected by a lack of support and motivation.

Poor rewarding system. In a system whereby, good deeds by staff are not recognized such staff may be forced to behave wrongly since they get nothing behaving well. (Participant 61)

While some respondents believe that they are trained to develop that behavior (as previously stated), others believe that their superiors provide a kind of motivation for them to thrive on. According to one such respondent:

Management provides awards to individuals who have outstanding ways of delivering business by sending them emails and rewarding them with an employee of the month. (Participant 55)

Another respondent adds that:

Members of staff who act responsibly in such situations are rewarded financially while those who act negligently face a committee to answer questions and normally face sanctions. (Participant 1)

Rewards play an essential role in organizations by encouraging employees to give off their best during service delivery. This is the argument by Marx, Soares and Barros (2016, p. 269) to the extent that organizations use a reward system to encourage certain desirable behaviors and actions. These desirable behaviors are expected to yield positive results in the short and long term. For many firms, every effort made by an employee is essential because they are a part of the service delivery process. Certain actions are invariably rewarded for having a positive impact on service delivery. Meyer *et al.* (2010) add that some firms provide signals about the essential nature of their employees' activities and, as a result, provide a form of reward for them.

### **Ownership and accountability**

A sense of ownership and accountability is the belief that the services provided, and the client belongs to the service employees and, therefore, would always do everything possible to ensure better service delivery. This sense of ownership further motivates the service personnel to work in the interest of the customer actively. A great sense of felt obligation which is sometimes based on ideological or relational grounds:

My colleagues and I took ownership of clients and wanted to please them in all ways possible. I saw the action. [...] I took as being accountable and a responsibility on my part to help realize the vision and vision of my organization. (Participant 27)

- show a sense of responsibility to my customers in that we are all working to sell the good name of our company to the public, so if my they maltreat my customers it would go a long way to affect us. (Participant 45)

Despite the fact that some respondents indicated that their sense of ownership was more important in allowing them to successfully discharge their duties, the structure is usually put in place by the organization:

---

Management has put in place accountability structures that make every teacher responsible for his/her students' academic performance. (Participant 19)

It is refreshing to note that customer service employees who are usually tasked with taking care of an assigned client (customer) do so with the mindset that service failure is unavoidable. They accomplish this by demonstrating a sense of responsibility to customers and going above and beyond to delight them. Customers, it can be argued, also play an important role in assisting frontline employees in developing a sense of ownership and responsibility. This idea is consistent with the argument advanced by [de Ruyter and Keeling \(2019\)](#), who stated that customer attitudes are critical drivers of organizational frontline service employees accepting stewardship.

### Conclusions and theoretical implications

The purpose of this study was to assess the nuances of customer stewardship behavior among service employees. Employees, according to the stewardship theory, act responsibly and in the best interests of others because such actions are consistent with their moral beliefs ([Davis et al., 1997](#)). Our findings suggest that organizational value is critical in the development of customer stewardship behavior in service employees. In terms of organizational values, it was clear from all of the interviews that companies with well-established corporate/administrative value systems instill these values in their service staff, who are mostly (as evidenced by our interviews) customer-centric. In all cases, the organizational value systems were created with the customer in mind. For example, valuing clients/customers, delighting customers and focusing on customers are all important. These organizational values systems make developing customer stewardship behaviors easier and more practical for service employees. This finding reinforces [Pitelis's \(2009\)](#) claim that organizational values and culture are required for developing customer-centric behaviors in service employees. As a result, as discussed in previous sections, our research has provided evidence to support and reinforce the claim that organizational value is critical in instilling customer stewardship behavior in in-service employees ([Hernandez, 2008](#)).

The study also demonstrates that human resource initiatives have an impact on customer stewardship behaviors. In the authors' conceptualization of human resource initiatives, training, professional development and rewards were deemed critical components. In terms of their effects on customer stewardship behaviors, all cases revealed that training and professional development are pivotal to developing customer stewardship behaviors among service employees. This result supports [Hafeez and Aburawi's \(2013\)](#) assertion that human resource initiatives are expected to help companies make better use of employee skills by providing training opportunities to improve those competencies, thereby increasing customer-oriented stewardship behaviors.

It is clear in all cases that businesses can teach their employees the importance of customer-centricity and how to respond quickly to customer problems through training and professional development. During the training sessions, topics such as dealing with customers and handling customer complaints are also covered. This accentuates [Hafeez and Abdelmeguid's \(2003\)](#) contention that developing soft core skills through training and having very clear human resource policies within the company are prerequisites for improving customer-oriented behaviors among employees. Employees can develop customer stewardship behaviors through this service, putting them in the best position to satisfy customer needs and wants and then achieve the company's goals and objectives.

Similarly, service employees are motivated to give their all in their service delivery efforts through reward systems devised by the firm. For example, it was clear from all of the cases that the reward systems encourage service employees to take ownership of the

---

services they provide and to act responsibly. This result corroborates [Tuzovic and Bruhn's \(2005\)](#) contention that a strong and comprehensive reward system is critical in developing customer-oriented behaviors among service employees, which can lead to customer satisfaction. Furthermore, because rewards are given to high-performing employees, service employees strive to give their best effort, particularly when dealing with customers and customer problems, which improves their customer stewardship behaviors.

Furthermore, the study evaluated the impact of ownership and accountability on the customer stewardship behavior of service employees and discovered that when service employees are made to own and become accountable for the services they provide, they deploy high levels of stewardship behaviors because they place the customer at the center. In all cases, ownership and accountability had a positive impact on service employees' customer stewardship behaviors. This is due to the ownership and accountability structure, which ensures that service employees own the customers and are accountable for all stages of service delivery.

The current study advances theory by applying stewardship theory ([Hernandez, 2012](#); [de Ruyter et al., 2009](#); [Block, 1993](#)), to important business and marketing concepts such as customer stewardship, organizational values, human resource initiatives and ownership and accountability. The existing literature on customer stewardship behavior, particularly the predictor variables investigated in this study, reveals a gap and a scarcity of studies using the stewardship theory. As a result, this study makes a modest contribution in that regard by adducing support for this vital theory from organizational values, human resource initiatives, as well as ownership and accountability perspectives. Furthermore, there appears to be a scarcity of research on customer stewardship that evaluates the interconnection of the constructs used in the study, specifically how the establishment of organizational values, human resource initiatives and ownership and accountability engender customer stewardship behaviors among service employees. Although several previous studies examined these constructs, they were either isolated or linked with other variables, highlighting the need for additional research in this area, particularly in theory development.

### **Practical implications**

Organizational values, according to our findings, influence service employees' behavior and direct them to conform to its ethos and pathos. Previous research indicates that organizational values ([Jain, 2020](#)) prescribe the ethical character of organizations and highlight what is worthwhile to pursue. This study strongly suggests that service organizations must find practical ways to instill organizational values in in-service employees because organizational values serve as the foundation for developing principles and beliefs that guide an organization's goals ([Gosendo and Torres, 2010](#)). Though it may appear difficult to implement, service firms can instill organizational values in the organization, particularly in-service employees, by, for example, making the company's moral codes prominent within the organization to ensure that they are kept at the forefront of every employee's mind. In addition to including it on the company website and in employee handbooks, companies can take the practical step of posting it in places where employees congregate.

Similarly, to develop customer stewardship behaviors among service employees, the firm must invest in human resource initiatives such as training, and development geared towards creating a sense of responsibility among the employees. Managers must also devise a reward system to encourage service employees to be good stewards of the customer. Base-salary increases, for example, and long-term incentive plans such as stock options have a

significant positive effect on service employees' customer stewardship dispositions. In addition, service employees who excel at their jobs should be given recognition.

Management must also instill in their employees a sense of ownership and accountability. Managers can accomplish this by communicating the customer visions of the company to service employees. To that end, managers must communicate the firm's mission and vision (particularly for customers) early and frequently. Furthermore, managers should give service employees as much freedom as possible in how they complete tasks delegated to them, particularly in how they serve customers.

### **Limitations and recommendations for future research**

Despite the many insights gained from this study, the emergence of COVID-19 pandemic meant that the researchers could not get access to a larger number of potential respondents. A large sample size and possibly, a quantitative method should be used in future studies to test our model. Per the literature, customer stewardship research is in its early stages. As a result, we recommend that more research be conducted, particularly on how customer stewardship affects the market success of firms.

### **References**

- Block, P. (1993), "Stewardship", *Choosing Service over Self-Interest*, Berrett-Koehler, San Francisco.
- Bondar, I., Umenyuk, T., Horban, Y., Karakoz, O. and Chaikovska, O. (2020), "Distance E-learning in the system of professional development of corporation managers: challenges of COVID-19", *Journal of Education and e-Learning Research*, Vol. 7 No. 4, pp. 456-463.
- Bowen, J. and Ford, R.C. (2004), "What experts say about managing hospitality service delivery systems", *International Journal of Contemporary Hospitality Management*, Vol. 16 No. 7, pp. 394-401.
- Brady, M.K. and Cronin, J.J. Jr. (2001), "Customer orientation: effects on customer service perceptions and outcome behaviors", *Journal of Service Research*, Vol. 3 No. 3, pp. 241-251.
- Bratton, J. and Gold, J. (2012), *Human Resource Management: Theory and Practice*, 5th ed., Palgrave Macmillan, Basingstoke.
- Calabuig, V., Olcina, G. and Panebianco, F. (2018), "Culture and team production", *Journal of Economic Behavior & Organization*, Vol. 149 No. 1 pp. 32-45.
- Caldwell, C. and Karri, R. (2005), "Organizational governance and ethical systems: a covenantal approach to building trust", *Journal of Business Ethics*, Vol. 58 No. 1, pp. 249-259.
- Creswell, J.W. (1998), *Qualitative Inquiry and Research Design: Choosing among Five Traditions*, Sage, Thousand Oaks, CA.
- Creswell, J.W. (2007), *Qualitative Inquiry & Research Design: Choosing Among Five Approaches*, 2nd ed., Sage, Thousand Oaks, CA.
- Davis, J.H., Schoorman, F.D. and Donaldson, L. (1997), "Davis, Schoorman, and Donaldson reply: the distinctiveness of agency theory and stewardship theory", *Academy of Management. The Academy of Management Review*, Vol. 22 No. 3, pp. 611-613.
- Davis, J., Frankforter, S., Vollrath, D. and Hill, V. (2007), "An empirical test of stewardship theory", *Journal of Business & Leadership: Research, Practice, and Teaching*, Vol. 3 No. 1, pp. 40-50.
- de Ruyter, K. and Keeling, D. (2019), "Responsible management on the organizational frontline: a stewardship perspective", *Emerald Open Research*, Vol. 1 No. 6, pp. 1-11.
- de Ruyter, K., de Jong, A. and de Wetzels, M. (2009), "Antecedents and consequences of environmental stewardship in boundary-spanning B2B teams", *Journal of the Academy of Marketing Science*, Vol. 37 No. 4, pp. 470-487.

- Dibrell, C. and Moeller, M. (2011), "The impact of a service-dominant focus strategy and stewardship culture on organizational innovativeness in family-owned businesses", *Journal of Family Business Strategy*, Vol. 2 No. 1, pp. 43-51.
- Donaldson, L. and Davis, J.H. (1991), "Stewardship theory or agency theory: CEO governance, and shareholder returns", *Australian Journal of Management*, Vol. 16 No. 1, pp. 49-64.
- Falk, E.B., Spunt, R.P. and Lieberman, M.D. (2012), "Ascribing beliefs to ingroup and outgroup political candidates: neural correlates of perspective-taking, issue importance and days until the election", *Philosophical Transactions of the Royal Society B: Biological Sciences*, Vol. 367 No. 1589, pp. 731-743.
- Financial Reporting Council (2010), "Draft revised UK stewardship code", available at: [www.manifest.co.uk/wp-content/uploads/2012/07/Appendix-to-Consultation-Draft-Revised-UK.pdf](http://www.manifest.co.uk/wp-content/uploads/2012/07/Appendix-to-Consultation-Draft-Revised-UK.pdf)
- Gammoh, B.S., Mallin, M.L. and Pullins, E.B. (2014), "The impact of salesperson-brand personality congruence on salesperson brand identification, motivation and performance outcomes", *Journal of Product and Brand Management*, Vol. 23 No. 7, pp. 543-553.
- Gosendo, E.E.M. and Torres, C.V. (2010), "The influence of organizational values on the management styles of small firms", *Paidéia (Ribeirão Preto)*, Vol. 20 No. 45, pp. 29-38.
- Gruber, T. (2011), "I want to believe they really care: how complaining customers want to be treated by frontline employees", *Journal of Service Management*, Vol. 22 No. 1, pp. 85-110.
- Gummesson, E. (1991), "Marketing-orientation revisited: the crucial role of the part-time marketer", *European Journal of Marketing*, Vol. 25 No. 2, pp. 60-75.
- Gummesson, E. and Grönroos, C. (2012), "The emergence of the new service marketing: Nordic school perspectives", *Journal of Service Management*, Vol. 23 No. 4, pp. 479-497.
- Hafeez, K. and AbdelMeguid, H. (2003), "Dynamics of human resource and knowledge management", *Journal of the Operational Research Society*, Vol. 54 No. 2, pp. 153-164.
- Hafeez, K. and Aburawi, I. (2013), "Planning human resource requirements to meet target customer service levels", *International Journal of Quality and Service Sciences*, Vol. 5 No. 2, pp. 230-252.
- Hernandez, M. (2008), "Promoting stewardship behavior in organizations: a leadership model", *Journal of Business Ethics*, Vol. 80 No. 1, pp. 121-128.
- Hernandez, M. (2012), "Toward an understanding of the psychology of stewardship", *Academy of Management Review*, Vol. 37 No. 2, pp. 172-193.
- Holmqvist, J. and Grönroos, C. (2012), "How does language matter for services? Challenges and propositions for service research", *Journal of Service Research*, Vol. 15 No. 4, pp. 430-442.
- Homburg, C., Müller, M. and Klarmann, M. (2011), "When should the customer be king? On the optimum level of salesperson customer orientation in sales encounters", *Journal of Marketing*, Vol. 75 No. 2, pp. 55-74.
- Jain, A. (2020), "Organizational values, HR bundles and collaboration with nonprofit organizations: a conceptual framework", *The Indian Journal of Industrial Relations*, Vol. 55 No. 3, pp. 426-440.
- Krzeminska, A. and Zeyen, A. (2017), "A stewardship cost perspective on the governance of delegation relationships: The case of social franchising", *Nonprofit and Voluntary Sector Quarterly*, Vol. 46 No. 1, pp. 71-91.
- Laird, R.D., Pettit, G.S., Dodge, K.A. and Bates, J.E. (2003), "Change in parents' monitoring knowledge: links with parenting, relationship quality, adolescent beliefs, and antisocial behavior", *Social Development*, Vol. 12 No. 3, pp. 401-419.
- Liao, H. and Chuang, A. (2004), "A multilevel investigation of factors influencing employee service performance and customer outcomes", *Academy of Management Journal*, Vol. 47 No. 1, pp. 41-58.
- Lin, J.S.C. and Lin, C.Y. (2011), "What makes service employees and customers smile", *Journal of Service Management*, Vol. 22 No. 2, pp. 183-201.

- Lingard, L. (2019), "Beyond the default colon: effective use of quotes in qualitative research", *Perspectives on Medical Education*, Vol. 8 No. 6, pp. 360-364.
- Matthews, L., Eilert, M., Carlson, L. and Gentry, J. (2020), "When and how frontline service employee authenticity influences purchase intentions", *Journal of Business Research*, Vol. 114, pp. 111-123.
- Meyer, R.D., Dalal, R.S. and Hermida, R. (2010), "A review and synthesis of situational strength in the organizational sciences", *Journal of Management*, Vol. 36 No. 1, pp. 121-140.
- Michailova, S. and Minbaeva, D.B. (2012), "Organizational values and knowledge sharing in multinational corporations: the Danisco case", *International Business Review*, Vol. 21 No. 1, pp. 59-70.
- Miller, D., Le Breton-Miller, I. and Scholnick, B. (2008), "Stewardship vs stagnation: an empirical comparison of small family and non-family businesses", *Journal of Management Studies*, Vol. 45 No. 1, pp. 50-78.
- Nowell, L.S., Norris, J.M., White, D.E. and Moules, N.J. (2017), "Thematic analysis: striving to meet the trustworthiness criteria", *International Journal of Qualitative Methods*, Vol. 16 No. 1, pp. 1-13.
- Pearson, H. and Sutherland, M. (2017), "The complexity of the antecedents influencing accountability in organisations", *European Business Review*, Vol. 29 No. 4, pp. 419-439.
- Pitelis, C.N. (2009), "The co-evolution of organizational value capture, value creation and sustainable advantage", *Organization Studies*, Vol. 30 No. 10, pp. 1115-1139.
- Rusaw, A.C. and Fisher, V.D. (2017), "Promoting training and professional development in government: the origins and early contributions of SPOD", *Public Administration Quarterly*, Vol. 41, pp. 216-232.
- Saldaña, J. (2013), *The Coding Manual of Qualitative Researchers*, 2nd ed., Los Angeles, London, New Delhi.
- Saunders, L. (2013), "Learning from our mistakes: reflections on customer service and how to improve it at the reference desk", *College and Undergraduate Libraries*, Vol. 20 No. 2, pp. 144-155.
- Schepers, J., Falk, T., de Ruyter, K., de Jong, A. and Hammerschmidt, M. (2012), "Principles and principals: do customer stewardship and agency control compete or complement when shaping frontline employee behavior?", *Journal of Marketing*, Vol. 76 No. 6, pp. 1-20.
- Schepers, J.J. and Van der Borgh, M. (2020), "A meta-analysis of frontline employees' role behavior and the moderating effects of national culture", *Journal of Service Research*, Vol. 23 No. 3, pp. 255-280.
- Singh, B. and Tiwari, A.A. (2020), "Customer stewardship behavior and stewardship fatigue: a conceptual framework", *Marketing Intelligence & Planning*, Vol. 38 No. 3, pp. 386-399.
- Sirianni, N.J., Bitner, M.J., Brown, S.W. and Mandel, N. (2013), "Branded service encounters: strategically aligning employee behavior with the brand positioning", *Journal of Marketing*, Vol. 77 No. 6, pp. 108-123.
- Starks, H. and Trinidad, S.B. (2007), "Choose your method: a comparison of phenomenology, discourse analysis, and grounded theory", *Qualitative Health Research*, Vol. 17 No. 10, pp. 1372-1380.
- Subramanian, S. (2018), "Stewardship theory of corporate governance and value system: the case of a family-owned business group in India", *Indian Journal of Corporate Governance*, Vol. 11 No. 1, pp. 88-102.
- Suhartanto, D., Dean, D., Nansuri, R. and Triyuni, N.N. (2018), "The link between tourism involvement and service performance: evidence from frontline retail employees", *Journal of Business Research*, Vol. 83, pp. 130-137.
- Thrassou, A., Santoro, G., Leonidou, E., Vrontis, D. and Christofi, M. (2020), "Emotional intelligence and perceived negative emotions in intercultural service encounters: building and utilizing knowledge in the banking sector", *European Business Review*, Vol. 32 No. 3, pp. 359-381.
- Torring, J. and Bentzen, T.Ø. (2020), "Does stewardship theory provide a viable alternative to control-fixated performance management?", *Administrative Sciences*, Vol. 10 No. 4, pp. 86-105.

- 
- Tuzovic, S. and Bruhn, M. (2005), "Integrating customer orientation, employee compensation and performance management: a conceptual framework", *International Journal of Business Performance Management*, Vol. 7 No. 3, pp. 255-274.
- van Tonder, E., Saunders, S.G., Lisita, I.T. and de Beer, L.T. (2018), "The importance of customer citizenship behaviour in the modern retail environment: introducing and testing a social exchange model", *Journal of Retailing and Consumer Services*, Vol. 45 No. 1 pp. 92-102.
- Varca, P.E. (2009), "Emotional empathy and frontline employees: does it make sense to care about the customer", *Journal of Services Marketing*, Vol. 23 No. 1, pp. 51-56.
- Zeithaml, V.A., Berry, L.L. and Parasuraman, A. (1996), "The behavioral consequences of service quality", *Journal of Marketing*, Vol. 60 No. 2, pp. 31-46.

### Further reading

- Brickson, S.L. (2013), "Athletes, best friends, and social activists: an integrative model accounting for the role of identity in organizational identification", *Organization Science*, Vol. 24 No. 1, pp. 226-245.
- Dabrowski, D., Brzozowska-Woś, M., Gołąb-Andrzejak, E. and Firgolska, A. (2019), "Market orientation and hotel performance: the mediating effect of creative marketing programs", *Journal of Hospitality and Tourism Management*, Vol. 41, pp. 175-183.
- Dhiman, P. and Arora, S. (2020), "A conceptual framework for identifying key employee branding dimensions: a study of hospitality industry", *Journal of Innovation and Knowledge*, Vol. 5 No. 3, pp. 200-209.
- Hafeez, K., Malak, N. and Abdelmeguid, H. (2006), "A TQM framework for business excellence", *Total Quality Management and Business Excellence*, Vol. 17 No. 9, pp. 1213-1229.
- Keay, A. (2017), "Stewardship theory: is board accountability necessary", *International Journal of Law and Management*, Vol. 59 No. 6, pp. 1292-1314.
- Kohli, A.K. and Jaworski, B.J. (1990), "Market orientation: the construct, research propositions, and managerial implications", *Journal of Marketing*, Vol. 54 No. 2, pp. 1-18.

### Corresponding author

Henry Boateng can be contacted at: [hboateng85@gmail.com](mailto:hboateng85@gmail.com)