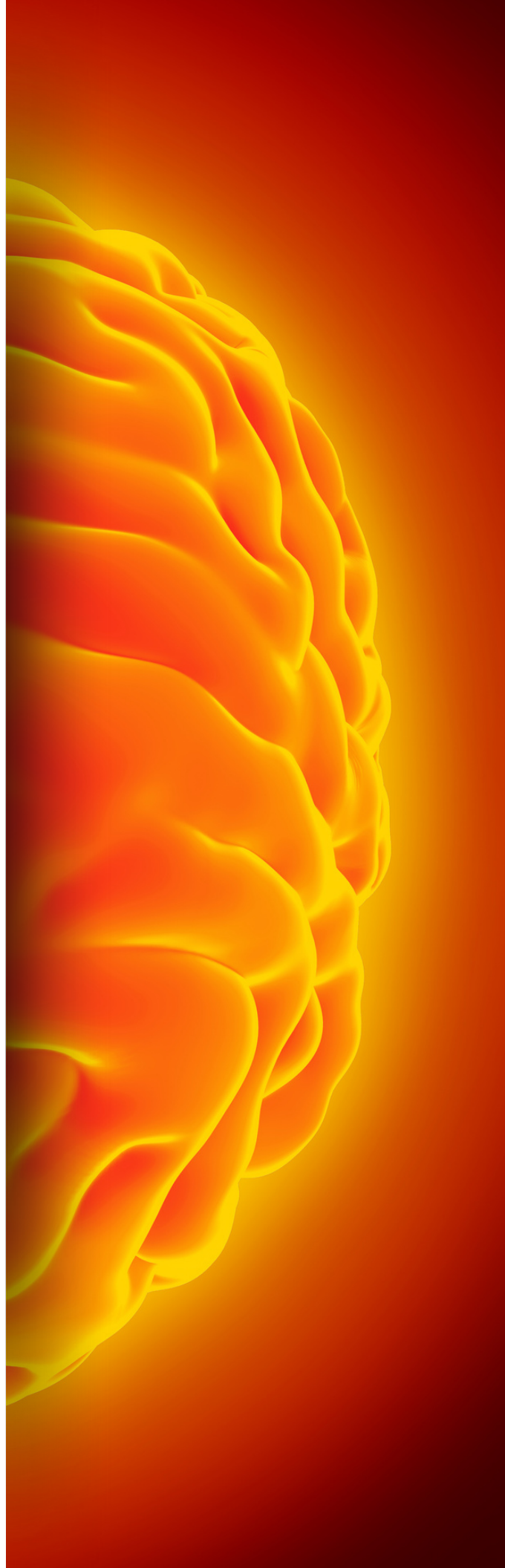


# GETTING INSIDE YOUR BRAIN...



**to better understand  
customer complains**

— by Janelle Barlow, Ph.D.  
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to gain insight about complaint handling from academic researchers' perspectives.  
A Complaint Is a Gift™ monthly blog by Janelle Barlow, PhD.

Janelle Barlow is shaking things up with her blog by reviewing academic complaint research papers—one a month for the next year. Research written in academic language is not always easy to read or understand unless you read a lot of them, and even then, the language used can be obtuse. To make this information accessible, Janelle will cut through complex models and statistical data to pull out useful information that business people can actually use. Some of the articles are recent and some were written by noted researchers years ago. Janelle has reviewed all these articles that will be shared with you, plus hundreds more that sit on her desktop. Her comments are in italics throughout this review.

If you find this information useful, feel free to copy the link and share it with others. I think you are going to learn some fresh perspectives on complaint handling in 2024! Any comments you make on LinkedIn read by others will help the entire complaint handling community.

## *BLOG DATE: JANUARY*



**ABSTRACT—"Diffusing Customer Anger in Service Recovery: A Conceptual Framework."**

Researchers: Doan T. Nguyen, University of Queensland Business School, email [d.nguyen@business.uq.edu.au](mailto:d.nguyen@business.uq.edu.au) and Janet R McColl-Kennedy, Ph.D. Associate Professor, University of Queensland Business School, email: [j.mccoll-kennedy@business.uq.edu.au](mailto:j.mccoll-kennedy@business.uq.edu.au).  
Electronic copy of this abstract is available at: <http://ssrn.com/abstract=1519206>.

This paper discusses what people who work in services such as retail shops or restaurants should do when customers get mad when something goes wrong. The authors advise two behavioral steps when responding to angry customers. The first step involves understanding why customers get mad and what upsets them. Once that understanding is clear, service staff can make customers less mad by listening to them, not blaming them, and apologizing. These steps will help service staff better understand how to make angry customers happy and satisfied.

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**Janelle:** *I think Nguyer and McColl-Kennedy offer solid advice, but it's not the first article where you will find such advice. My position, however, is that starting by thanking customers for their complaints (their gifts) will more likely enable a positive communication chain to begin the conversation. When this happens, anger typically dissipates, and customers don't build on their anger but instead start to work with the service provider to solve the problem.*

**1. Action Plan:** The authors of this article describe a plan that can be used when customers get upset about service they have received—or not received. The authors say that no studies have specifically investigated relationships between negative emotions resulting from service failures and exploration of practical strategies for recovery attempts. To fill this gap, the authors argue that a two-phase conceptual framework can help better understand and respond to customer anger in a service failure/recovery context.

The authors suggest it's not just about whether the customer's expectations (The authors call them "goals.") are met when they purchase in a store or eat in a restaurant that makes them angry. Instead, they think studying how anger is triggered rather than what makes customers angry is essential. At this point, the authors get very academic; they discuss such causes as causal attribution, cognitive appraisal theories, the relationship between service failure categories and triggered emotions, and cognitive appraisal.

**Janelle:** *To use the above causes, such as cognitive appraisal theories, as workable models, they are probably beyond the understanding of most complaint handlers. However, when the concepts above are simplified, the authors' advice can enable complaint handlers to work through what the customer is experiencing. These steps include the ones listed below.*

**2. Figuring Out Causes of Customer Anger:** First, the service provider needs to put on their detective's hat to understand why the customer got angry. Anger could include that something didn't meet the customer's expectations. It could be that the customer had a long wait to get a table, and their anger had nothing to do with food quality. Whatever it is, the service provider needs to be able to answer this question as directly and simply as possible: what really made my customer angry?

**Janelle:** *The answer to the source of the customer's anger probably involves asking several questions. Customers may say it was one thing, but it was another. Service managers can easily guide their staff to ask themselves when meeting an angry customer: What is making my customer angry? And then start asking questions instead of focusing on the customer's anger.*

**3. Helping Customers Feel Better:** The authors' next point suggests making the customers feel better by carefully listening to them, not blaming them, and offering sincere apologies.

**Janelle:** *I suggest listening should be the first step because it facilitates explanation and apology—but only after first thanking the customer for reporting their issue. Listening shows concern and gives customers a chance to voice their opinions. From a customer's perspective, without listening, a service provider cannot provide a meaningful, convincing explanation for why something happened. The customer wants to hear empathy about their anger. Then, a genuine apology is more straightforward to deliver.*

**4. Understanding How People Think When Angry.** The authors point out that when customers become angry, they probably think and feel something wasn't done right.

**Janelle:** *While this is an important point, the authors are missing something: anger is a way for customers to tell the service providers that their situation is important to them. Anger says: Listen to me; something is essential, or I wouldn't be angry.*

**5.Solving Problems:** The research article offers a conceptual framework to understand customer anger following service failure. The authors believe that anger is triggered by service failures for which customers blame service providers.

Based on this framework, the authors propose strategies to diffuse customer anger, including listening, not blaming the customer, and offering an apology. They argue that listening gives the service provider a chance to identify the cause of the problem, decode the cause of anger, and decide upon appropriate response techniques.

**6. Importance of Apologizing:** Apologizing plays a big part in improving things. The authors say that when a customer receives an apology, it compensates them and helps repair any ego damage connected with the service failure.

**Janelle:** *I have a few reservations about this piece of advice. Unless some level of rapport is created with the customer, apologizing can sound like a script, and when the customer hears "I'm sorry" repeated dozens of times, it becomes irritating. Customers begin to find fault with the company for all those apologies.*

**7.Next Steps:** The researchers propose "that customer anger is triggered by a service failure which they perceive as the service provider's fault," and this source of anger needs to be studied in depth. The authors say there is much more to understand about this topic, which is always the case regarding customer complaints.

**Janelle:** *My research and research by other academics suggest that anger can be triggered by any number of events, not just a belief that the service provider is to blame for something. Whatever the cause, listening will help the service provider hear the reason for the anger and perhaps do something about the situation. It's called "Gold Star" service.*

*There is value in this academic paper, but mainly, it's the authors' strong emphasis on listening. Without careful listening, service representatives must guess what is in the customer's mind and what has contributed to the customer's anger. To do this requires not treating a complaint as a transaction or a problem to be solved but instead using questions to create or deepen a relationship. Then fix the problem and apologize! But remember, start off with a strong thank you to the customer for their gift to you and your organization.*