

Customer rage: we're all madder than hell and aren't taking it any more

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IT HAPPENS to just about everyone. You are in a glacial bank queue, stuck in an unmoving line for lunch, or waiting an eternity for coffee. And when you finally make it to the counter, the attendant sighs sarcastically and says "What?"

Customer rage - when otherwise polite shoppers snap and turn into rampaging rhinos - is on the rise. Now a team of Sydney academics is studying the problem in Australia and overseas, designing ways to make shopping as painless as possible for customers and staff.

If we can predict the things that trigger customer rage, we can stop most of it from happening, said Paul Patterson, head of the school of marketing at the University of NSW.

"The research has all sorts of implications for the recruitment and training of staff," he said. "Already we are seeing some patterns forming. There seems to be some correlation between someone's personality type and their propensity to fly into a rage."

Not surprisingly, people with short tempers are the most likely to explode when they are tired, in a hurry, or just frazzled.

But some research suggests that Australian society as a whole is becoming quicker to anger.

Choice, the consumer watchdog organisation, fields about 2500 complaints a week from people who want to voice an opinion about a company or service but has increasingly becoming a target of customer rage itself.

"We have even had some white powder sent to the office as a threat," said Choice's spokeswoman, Indira Naidoo. "The call-centre workers have noticed that people have been triggered off by smaller and smaller things [in the past five years], they're no longer giving people the benefit of the doubt, and there tends to be more hurling of abuse."

A Queensland University study in 2005 found that customer rage was increasing because more people felt they "know their rights" and had less free time to reflect and calm down.

Professor Patterson's University of NSW research team has conducted 50 in-depth interviews with victims and perpetrators of customer rage in Australia, the US, China and Thailand, with more to come this year.

The researchers found that most serious incidents occurred after a "double deviation", when a customer feels he or she has been treated disrespectfully twice in succession.

"We all have an ego, a sense of self-esteem, and standing in a bank queue for 20 minutes threatens that," Professor Patterson said. "If someone is rude to you again, after you have already asked them to fix it up, that's when we have problems."

The University of NSW team has a three-year grant from the Australian Research Council to study customer rage, and will deliver its findings in 2008.

COUNTER ACTION

- * A man who was not allowed to return an unused can of paint drilled a hole in it and carried it dripping around the store.
- * A woman who wanted to exchange baby formula at a chemist became infuriated, returning later to spray the formula over staff.
- * A man who was told his electricity would be disconnected when his bill was eight weeks overdue threatened to blow up the power

company's headquarters.

* A woman whose light mocha was not stirred properly poured it on the counter.

* A woman was still in tears six months after a department store sold her a faulty air-conditioner and refused to replace it.