



MARKETING & TECHNOLOGY

Service, emotional labor, and mindfulness



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KEYWORDS

Mindfulness;
Emotional labor;
Service encounter;
Creativity

Abstract From the seclusion of monastic life to the noise of Silicon Valley, the ancient practice of mindfulness has ‘come out of the cloister.’ As an antidote to mindless cognition and behavior, the practice of mindfulness—with its principle of grounding attention in the present moment—has been shown to have powerful and positive effects at both the individual and the collective level and in fields as wide-ranging as medicine, schooling, prison programs, law and negotiation, business, and even the army. This installment of Marketing & Technology introduces mindfulness to managers and explores its potential for enhancing the service encounter. We begin by reviewing the two main conceptualizations of mindfulness: the cognitive and the contemplative. We then explore the service encounter from the perspective of emotional labor and show how mindfulness can change surface acting into deep acting, thereby significantly improving the service encounter for both the consumer and provider. We also explore the other benefits of mindfulness and their application to the service encounter: adaptability, flexibility, and creativity. We conclude by sharing resources for managers interested in implementing mindfulness training.

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1. Mindfulness: Monastery to main street

When we are in a state of mindlessness, we act like automatons who have been programmed to act according to the sense our behavior made in the past, rather than the present. Instead of actively drawing new distinctions, noticing new things, as we do when we are mindful, when we

are mindless we rely on distinctions drawn in the past. We are stuck in a single, rigid perspective, and we are oblivious to alternative ways of knowing. When we are mindless, our behavior is rule and routine governed; when we are mindful, rules and routines may guide our behavior rather than predetermine it. (Langer, 2000, p. 220)

Much has been written about Steve Jobs as an innovator, visionary, and leader. What is now emerging is that Jobs was a long-term practitioner of what is now termed mindfulness. In Jobs’ own words (Isaacson, 2011, p. 48):

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If you just sit and observe, you will see how restless your mind is. If you try to calm it, it only makes it worse, but over time it does calm, and when it does, there's room to hear subtler things—that's when your intuition starts to blossom and you start to see things more clearly and be in the present more. Your mind just slows down, and you see a tremendous expanse in the moment. You see so much more than you could see before.

Today, mindfulness is increasingly transitioning from the monastery to the mainstream. It has been shown to be beneficial in a wide range of fields, such as medicine, sports, education, and, more recently, management. Studies have explored the effect of mindfulness on psychological and physical well-being (e.g., [Brown & Ryan, 2003](#)), as well as task performance (e.g., [Dane & Brummel, 2013](#)). Faced with the empirical evidence of the positive effects of mindfulness, large corporations such as Google and General Mills now offer mindfulness training to their employees.

In this article, we introduce managers to the two main views of individual mindfulness and discuss their effects on service encounters, including the personal interaction between consumers and service providers ([Guiry, 1992](#)).

2. What is mindfulness?

Mindfulness is a multi-dimensional concept with a rich and evolving history. For centuries, “sages across many cultures have trumpeted the benefits of mindfulness” ([Dane & Brummel, 2013](#), p. 106). There are two main views on individual mindfulness. One emerged from contemplative psychology (e.g., [Kabat-Zinn, 1994](#)), the other from social psychology (e.g., [Langer, 1989](#)). We now explore these in detail and discuss their similarities and differences.

2.1. Contemplative perspective of mindfulness

The modern term, ‘mindfulness,’ has its roots in the Buddhist notion of *sati*, the Pali word meaning awareness or skillful attentiveness. Although the term is of Buddhist origin, very similar practices and notions can be found in virtually all the contemplative branches of the world religions—from Hinduism to Taoism, Christianity to Islam, and Judaism to Shamanism ([Plante, 2010](#)).

Contemplative mindfulness emphasizes a nonre-active awareness and concentration of the body and the mind in the present moment. For example, [Kabat-Zinn \(1994, p. 4\)](#) argues that mindfulness

refers to the awareness that arises through “paying attention in a particular way: on purpose, in the present moment, and nonjudgmentally.” Similarly, [Bishop et al. \(2004\)](#) define mindfulness as a kind of non-elaborative, nonjudgmental, and present-centered awareness in which each thought, feeling, or sensation that arises is acknowledged and accepted as it is. This tradition maintains that clearing the mind and living in the moment enables an individual to access the world directly as it is. It is a notion known in psychology as honest perception, in contrast to interpretation (judgment), projection, introjection, illusion, and hallucination (e.g., [Yeganeh, 2006](#)).

The other important element of this perspective is that mindfulness is deemed to be a self-regulated attention that can be cultivated as a virtue by some form of reflective practice ([Baer, 2003](#)). This kind of attention is moment-to-moment and ongoing, alert to mental contents and aware of internal and external phenomena. The practice of mindfulness involves keeping the mind grounded in the present moment and—over time—reducing reactivity to what arises in the moment so that interpretations are increasingly decoupled from automatic mental processes, such as impulses or heuristics that are often biased or inaccurate ([Dane, 2011](#)).

2.2. Cognitive perspective of mindfulness

The second view of mindfulness comes from social psychology, and specifically from the pioneering work on mindlessness and choice by Ellen Langer (e.g., [Ie, Ngnoumen, & Langer, 2014](#)). Langer's concept of mindfulness emphasizes cognitive differentiation, the active drawing of new distinctions. [Langer \(1989\)](#) argues that mindfulness is a basic state of mind, a state of alertness and lively awareness. This manifests in three ways: (1) the creation of new and the refinement of existing categories and distinctions; (2) the creation of new, discontinuous categories out of streams of events; and (3) the more nuanced appreciation of context and alternative ways to deal with it. Here, mindfulness is seen as a meta-process that interprets external and internal stimuli with a focus on drawing new distinctions.

2.3. Contemplative and cognitive perspectives: Differences and similarities

Compared with the contemplative perspective of mindfulness, the cognitive perspective focuses more on the way people cope with new, ambiguous, and ill-defined situations. Mindful individuals, from the cognitive perspective, resist relying on old habits when faced with change and are not constrained

by existing concepts; they are flexible in interpreting and coping with novel situations (Langer, 1997). Another difference between contemplative and cognitive perspectives involves the role that meditation plays in cultivating mindfulness. “Langer characterizes mindfulness as a universal human capacity that need not to be enhanced through the practice of meditation” (Greeson, Garland, & Black, 2014, p. 2). Rather, mindfulness is gained by maintaining an orientation in the present, openness to novelty, alertness to distinctions, sensitivity to different contexts, and an awareness of multiple perspectives (Langer, 1989).

Despite these differences, the two perspectives of mindfulness share four significant similarities (e.g., *le et al.*, 2014). First, they both focus on moment-to-moment awareness and stress the importance of ‘presence’ or openness to novelty (Siegel & Siegel, 2014). In other words, both perspectives maintain that mindfulness is about “freeing oneself from misperceptions, thinking patterns, and self-imposed limitations that impede creativity, clear seeing, and optimal mental and physical health” (Greeson et al., 2014, p. 533). Second, they both subscribe to mind-body oneness. Both view the mind and body as “a single system. . . every change in the human being is simultaneously a change at the level of the mind—cognitive changes, as well as the body—cellular, hormonal, neural changes” (*le et al.*, 2014, pp. 2–3). Third, they agree mindfulness can be systematically developed through practice. Finally, both argue that mindfulness can contribute to increased positive qualities and experiences. We now turn to the service encounter and the role that mindful/mindless attention plays.

3. What is the service encounter and why is it important?

The contemporary, service-dominant view of marketing emphasizes the central role of service in value creation (Vargo & Lusch, 2004). Value is “subjective and always ultimately determined by the beneficiary, who in turn is always a co-creator of the value” (Lusch, Vargo, & O’Brien, 2007, p. 17). Thus, value is not merely embedded in the product and delivered to the customer; it also is co-created by the customer and employee as they interact. Competing through service has to do with treating employees and customers “as collaborators that work with the firm to co-create value for all the stakeholders” (Lusch et al., 2007, p. 17).

In ‘pure’ services—such as airline services, healthcare, financial planning, and auto repair—where a physical product is not exchanged,

the provider-consumer interaction is at the heart of determining value for the customer. Yet even when the focus of the exchange is a tangible object, such as clothing purchased in a department store, the service interaction can leave an indelible impression on the consumer.

Normann (1984) used the phrase “moment of truth,” borrowed from the book on bullfighting by Hemingway (1932), to describe the encounter between service provider and customer. It is often at this moment of truth when the customer makes a critical assessment and evaluates the service (Carlzon, 1987). Their experience within the service process is an important determinant of their satisfaction and assessment of service quality (Parasuraman, Zeithaml, & Berry, 1985). Indeed, Dasu and Chase (2010) argue that organizations seeking to excel in customer service need to attack the soft side of customer management with the same intensity they have previously used to reengineer workflow and supply chains.

4. What does a good service encounter require from the employee?

When we stress how critical the service encounter is for customer satisfaction, we have to examine this matter from the perspective of the other value co-creator: the employee. Specifically, what does a good service encounter require from the employee?

The value co-created by the employee and customer in a service encounter is idiosyncratic, experiential, contextual, and meaning-laden (Vargo & Lusch, 2008). Therefore, a good service encounter requires employees to: (1) regulate their emotions to be attentive and patient, (2) understand customers’ expectations, (3) adapt to the situation of the encounter, and (4) generate flexible and creative solutions (Lloyd & Luk, 2011). Next, we discuss how mindfulness can improve the service encounter. We will explore how mindfulness can redesign the psychological or implicit aspects of service encounters through influencing the aforementioned factors.

5. How would mindfulness improve the service encounter?

5.1. Emotion regulation

In her seminal book, *The Managed Heart*, Hochschild (1983, p. 6) compared the labor of a wallpaper factory boy with that of a flight attendant, saying that “in the courses of doing this physical and

mental labor, she (the flight attendant) is also doing something more, something I defined as emotional labor.” This labor requires the flight attendant to induce or suppress her feelings in order to sustain an outward countenance that is both empathetic and pleasing to the customer. This labor requires “a coordination of mind and feeling, and it sometimes draws on a source of self that we honor as deep and integral to our individuality” (Hochschild, p. 7). In other words, emotional labor involves “efforts made to understand others, to have empathy with their situation, to feel their feelings as a part of one’s own” (England & Farkas, 1986, p. 91).

Indeed, people in service roles—clinicians, hotel workers, airline flight attendants, tour operators, coaches, and counselors—often face significant emotional labor demands. This labor requires employees to regulate their emotion in the workplace and essentially ‘act their part.’ There are two modes of acting that occur when employees perform service roles: surface acting and deep acting (Grandey, 2015). In surface acting, the employee feigns emotion and wears expressions like a mask. For example, the flight attendants that Hochschild (1983) talked about often spoke of their smiles as being *on* them, but not *of* them. Deep acting, by contrast, focuses on inner feelings and tries to invoke the actual displayed feelings or emotions, as a method actor does when portraying a role.

Research by Hülshager and Schewe (2011) suggests that people who surface act over long periods tend to suffer from job burnout and poor health. The effort of maintaining a difference between what an employee feels on the inside and what they show on the outside is highly strenuous (Hochschild, 1983). In her interview with the flight attendants, Hochschild (1983, p. 90) was told: “We try to reduce this strain by pulling the two closer together either by changing what we feel or by changing what we feign.”

By changing internal feelings so that more natural and authentic emotions are displayed, deep acting is good for job-related outcomes in the form of positive work attitudes and interpersonal performance (Hülshager & Schewe, 2011). Obviously, with a long-term view of sustaining superior service, managers should consider how to help employees use more deep acting and less surface acting. In this regard, mindfulness training can be highly beneficial.

As discussed previously, contemplative mindfulness refers to a non-reactive awareness of the present moment. Thus, mindful employees pay moment-to-moment attention to the service encounter with equanimity; that is, without rejection or attachment to sensations (touch, taste, smell, vision, and hearing) or thoughts (Kabat-Zinn, 1994).

Their interpretations of the context, meaning, or experiences are increasingly decoupled from automatic mental processes, such as impulses or heuristics that are often biased or inaccurate (Dane, 2011). They are aware of self-centered thoughts and inclinations, yet enjoy a degree of freedom from them (Kabat-Zinn, 1994). This freedom enables them to respond more skillfully in service encounters through a deep understanding of and empathy for their customers.

5.2. Understanding customer expectations

Mindful employees, from a contemplative perspective, have a deeper empathy for their customers. They are able to observe and read customers’ emotions more clearly, as well as their own self-centered or self-serving thoughts or inclinations. This enables employees to put themselves into people’s shoes and feel their feelings.

From the cognitive perspective (Langer, 1989), mindful employees have the ability to question automatic patterns of thought and action. They are able to draw new distinctions in streams of events and generate novel ways to cope with the particularities of the service encounter. Moreover, they are able to engage in dialectical thinking, which is seeing things from different or opposing points of view (Langer, 1989). This ability helps employees avoid becoming trapped in their habitual routines. As a result, mindful employees do a better job of understanding and responding to customer expectations—a prerequisite for delivering superior service (Parasuraman, Berry, & Zeithaml, 1991).

Knowles (2008) described two scenarios to illustrate how mindfulness training can change a clinician’s attitude and actions toward a patient in a service encounter. Below is the service encounter *before* Dr. Turner, the clinician, practiced mindful attention (Knowles, 2008, p. 56):

Ms. Smith comes to the clinic, again complaining of vague abdominal pains. She will be seen by Dr. Turner, who has dealt with her and this complaint on numerous occasions in the past. On the way into the room, Dr. Turner thinks, “Here we go again. I don’t know how many times I have gone over this with her and explained that there is nothing wrong. It is all in her head.” Soon after Ms. Smith begins to describe her symptoms to Dr. Turner, she begins to cry. Dr. Turner hands her a box of tissues and thinks, “I don’t do tears.”

Here, Dr. Turner is trapped in past judgments and driven by the discomfort and annoyance he feels at

his patient's emotional expression. He has concluded what is wrong with the patient even before he examines her. He may think that he is responding to facts: the patient's history and her current physical condition. However, in reality he is reacting mindlessly. He is unaware of his own thoughts, affect, physiological state, and intentions, let alone those of the patient. Next we have the service encounter *after* Dr. Turner practiced mindful attention (Knowles, 2008, p. 57):

Dr. Turner breathes deeply before entering the room to see Ms. Smith. He notes that the patient is here for the vague complaint of abdominal pain. Dr. Turner acknowledges having the thought of having been in this situation before with Ms. Smith, and then focuses his attention on this encounter. As Ms. Smith begins to cry during the encounter, Dr. Turner acknowledges his own feeling of discomfort. He accepts that in this moment she feels discomfort, and he does not react to it by trying to control the situation to make his own unpleasant feeling go away. Rather than try to stop Ms. Smith's crying, he acknowledges that this seems very important to Ms. Smith and asks if she would like to have a tissue before they continue.

Here, Dr. Turner is attuned to his own experiences that occur from moment to moment. When he discovers that things are changing and thoughts such as "Here we go again" or "It's the same thing again" may be erroneous, he can free himself from routine, automatic responses which contain little new understanding of the customer (Knowles, 2008).

Moreover, with mindfulness, Dr. Turner is able to avoid surface acting such as wearing a feigned look of concern while being bored and irritated. He is able to acknowledge both his own feelings and those of his patient and reconcile the two in an authentic manner. Such deep acting is not only positively related to customer satisfaction, but is also related to employee satisfaction (Humphrey, Ashforth, & Diefendorff, 2015).

5.3. Situational adaptability and flexibility

The service-dominant view of marketing emphasizes the idiosyncratic, experiential, contextual, and meaning-laden features of interaction value (Vargo & Lusch, 2008). How adaptable the service delivery system is when customers have special needs or requests becomes a prominent source of customer satisfaction (Zeithaml, Bitner, & Gremler, 2006). In these cases, customers judge service encounters in terms of the flexibility of

the employees and the system. Hence, it is often important for employees to avoid mindless routines and adjust the service encounter to the specific customer.

Aside from special requests from customers, other situations of the service encounter—such as service failure—also demand flexibility and adaptability. In fact, many researchers argue that it is often suboptimal to routinize the service encounter since this contradicts the notion that customer satisfaction is obtained through the dynamic nature of human interaction (Bettencourt & Gwinner, 1996). Indeed, standardization and routinization in the service encounter can exacerbate even minor issues of poor service delivery.

For example, when organizations engage in service recovery, their efforts with standardized customer service operations often reinforce customer's initial negative reactions (Hart, Heskett, & Sasser, 1989). Even though employees in the service encounter respond to customers by following a service script, they might be distracted by recalling the mechanical memory of the rules in the service script without paying attention to what the customer is saying in the present moment. This is a classic case of mindlessness. "When we are mindless, our behavior is rule and routine governed; when we are mindful, rules and routines may guide our behavior rather than predetermine it" (Langer, 2000, p. 220). Mindlessly following a script may cause the employee to ignore the greater variation in customer demands or other customer signals (Ashforth & Fried, 1988). Therefore, delivering superior service encounters requires situational flexibility and adaptability from employees.

Both contemplative and cognitive perspectives maintain that mindfulness is about "freeing oneself from misperceptions, thinking patterns, and self-imposed limitations that impede creativity, clear seeing, and optimal mental and physical health" (Greeson et al., 2014, p. 533). As such, mindful employees gain more degrees of freedom in their responses. When confronted with special requests or other situations in service encounters (e.g., service failure), mindful employees are able to respond by changing their behaviors according to the situation. Moreover, mindful individuals are able to see things from opposing points of view and recognize the value of each perspective. Because they can appreciate alternatives—even if those are not the alternatives they would have selected—it is easier for mindful employees to realize, accept, and adapt to necessities or unwanted outcomes (Langer, 1989). In summary, mindfulness leads to a more flexible attitude toward change, an attitude that sees opportunities rather than threats in new situations.

5.4. Creativity of solutions

In addition to flexibility and adaptability, mindfulness can help employees bring creativity to service encounters. Due to the capability of freeing themselves from spirals of negative thoughts and feelings, mindful employees are more emotionally balanced and can choose positive affective and behavioral reactions to newly emergent events (Neves, 2009). Moreover, while negative emotions (e.g., depression) limit cognition, positive emotions broaden cognitive potential and enhance creative thinking. Mindfulness has thus been shown to reduce negative emotions and enhance cognitive potential and creativity (Langer, 1997). Indeed, emotion regulation, understanding, situational adaptability and flexibility, and creativity of solutions are closely related to each other: all can be leveraged to deliver a superior service encounter. In research in which customers and employees are asked to provide personal stories about satisfying and dissatisfying service encounters, one patient mentioned the following experience at a hospital (Bitner, Booms, & Tetreault, 1990, p. 78):

I didn't have an appointment to see a doctor; however, my allergy nurse spoke to a practitioner's assistant and worked me in to the schedule. I received treatment after a 10-minute wait. I was very satisfied with the special treatment I received, the short wait, and the quality of the service.

Another story was told by a hotel employee as follows:

The weather was very cold and I got off work at 7 a.m. as night auditor. Three groups of hotel guests were having trouble starting their cars in the cold. I told them that if they would like to sit in the lobby and have some coffee, I would jump start their cars.

These service encounters reflect the mindfulness of the nurse and the night auditor as service workers. They deviate from routinized reactions and responses such as "Sorry, no appointment" and "Sorry, I am off duty." Adaptability to the emergent situation allowed the employees to create excellent service encounters that left indelible impressions on the patient and hotel guests. Their solutions positively impacted both overall quality and customer satisfaction, and ultimately led to positive word of mouth (Lloyd & Luk, 2011).

6. Discussion and conclusion

Today, service plays a pivotal role in marketing and firms attach great importance to the improvement

of service encounters. Yet, when managers think about innovation in customer service, they usually think about industrial or process enhancements that make service delivery faster or more efficient (Dasu & Chase, 2010). We suggest that managers also pay close attention to subtleties in the interactions between service workers and customers; however, because service value is idiosyncratic, experiential, contextual, and meaning-laden (Vargo & Lusch, 2008), this is not a simple task. Managers need technologies to redesign the soft side—the psychological aspects—of service encounters; mindfulness is one such technology.

This article introduces the notion of mindfulness to managers and suggests that it can dramatically enhance service encounters in a number of ways. First, mindfulness enables service employees to use deep acting. This not only sidesteps the pernicious effect of surface acting on employees' well-being, but also heightens positive attitudes and feelings toward their work and to their customers. Second, mindfulness fosters empathy toward others, which in the service encounter translates into a deeper understanding of customers' expectations; this, in turn, is a prerequisite of superior service. Third, mindfulness training can transform employees' thinking patterns by rendering them more flexible and creative. With mindfulness, employees are more easily able to adapt to each newly emergent service encounter more easily and generate more skillful and creative solutions. Last but not least, mindfulness can enhance employee job satisfaction and thus reduce the high turnover that is characteristic of so many service jobs (Dane, 2011; Dane & Brummel, 2013).

Given that mindfulness can be systematically developed through practice, managers might find it worthwhile to implement mindfulness training in their organizations. Employees who practice this skill will derive benefits in several domains, including mental coherence, physical health, and interpersonal functioning. Moreover, studies show that empathy, interpersonal sensitivity, and compassion are effectively improved with consistent practice of mindful awareness (Knowles, 2008).

General Mills, Google, Apple, Nike, Aetna, and McKinsey are on the growing list of companies that recognize the rewards of mindfulness (Frankel, 2013). Following are useful resources for managers who are interested in instigating more mindful service:

Center for Mindfulness in Medicine, Health Care, and Society - <http://www.umassmed.edu/cfm>

The Langer Mindfulness Institute - <http://langermindfulnessinstitute.com>

Guided Mindful Practices with Jon Kabat-Zinn - <http://www.mindfulnesscds.com>
 Institute for Mindful Leadership - <http://instituteformindfulleadership.org>
 UCLA Mindful Awareness Research Center - <http://http://marc.ucla.edu>

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