

Well-Dressed Women Get Better Service At Clothing Stores

If women want the best possible service at a clothing store, they had better be looking fashionable and well-groomed before they hit the mall. A new study found that well-dressed and groomed women received the friendliest and, in some cases, fastest service from salesclerks.

Researchers secretly observed interactions between customers and salesclerks at three large-sized women's clothing stores, timing how long clerks took to greet customers, and rating the clerks' friendliness.

Customers whose clothes were rated as more fashionable and attractive, and who showed better grooming and make-up skills, received better service than those whose appearance was not rated as highly.

“How well-dressed you are is one indicator of your status, and how much money you have to spend,” said Sharron Lennon, co-author of the study and professor of consumer sciences at Ohio State University.

“Salesclerks believe that a well-dressed person is more likely to buy, and that affects the treatment she receives.”

Lennon conducted the study with Minjeong Kim, an assistant professor at Oregon State University, who did the work while a graduate student at Ohio State.

Their results were published in a recent issue of Clothing and Textiles Research Journal.

Other studies that looked at how customer dress affected service have had conflicting results, Kim said. One reason may be that most of those studies didn't examine real customers, but instead involved confederates of the researchers who were dressed in specific outfits to see how they affected service.

“We studied real customers, which is much more realistic,” Kim said.

For this study, two researchers observed 90 women who entered three mall-based clothing stores (30 customers at each store). The researchers watched these 90 women's interactions with 13 different salespersons.

They chose large-sized clothing stores partly to ensure that the body size of the customers was not a factor in how they were treated, Lennon said. But also, the large –sized apparel business is one of the faster-growing segments in the fashion industry, making it a good focus of study.

As customers entered the stores, the researchers rated 10 components of their dress and overall presentation on a scale from poor to good. The components were attractiveness of clothing, fashionability, formality, femininity, overall grooming, hair grooming, make-up, clothing fabric quality, accessory quality and purse quality.

Friendliness of clerks was rated from highly friendly to highly unfriendly. To rate friendliness, the researchers examined whether and how much the salespeople smiled at the shoppers, how close they approached, and whether they continued to do other work, like folding clothes, or gave their full attention to the customers, Kim said.

“The body language of the salespeople is very important in showing friendliness,” Kim said.

In addition, the researchers used a stopwatch to time how long it took clerks to greet customers.

The results showed nine of the 10 appearance components of customers had an impact on the friendliness of clerks. The only item that was not related to friendliness was the femininity of clothing.

However, only four items were related to how promptly shoppers were greeted by clerks – hair grooming, fabric quality, accessory quality, and purse quality.

Kim said “subtle clues” such as accessories affected how quickly the clerks approached customers, while the overall appearance affected friendliness.

These results suggest appearance is not as important in how quickly customers are greeted as it is in how friendly they are treated, Lennon said.

The difference is probably in training, she said.

“Specialty clothing stores pride themselves on their customer service, and on greeting customers very quickly. Clerks know to come up to customers within seconds of them entering to see if they can help,” according to Lennon.

“It becomes automatic for clerks to approach customers immediately,” Kim added. “Some stores say salespeople should greet customers within 30 seconds.”

But friendliness, the researchers said, is not an integral part of training.

“I don't think salespeople are consciously being unfriendly to specific people,” Lennon said.

“But all of us learn to make assumptions about strangers quickly, and we don't have much to go on besides how they look. These assumptions guide our actions. In this case, salespeople may not be as friendly to people who they view as unlikely to buy.”

Lennon said explicit training about how to convey friendliness will probably be successful, just as training seems to have made clerks respond quickly to greet shoppers.

“I think most salespeople would make an effort to be friendlier if they were trained,” she said.

Source: Ohio State University

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