

**TRADE TALES: DECODING
CUSTOMERS' STORIES**

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ADVANCES IN CULTURE, TOURISM AND
HOSPITALITY RESEARCH VOLUME 14

TRADE TALES: DECODING CUSTOMERS' STORIES

BY

ARCH G. WOODSIDE

Curtin University, Australia



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LIST OF CONTRIBUTORS

<i>Rachael Bish</i>	University of Waikato, New Zealand
<i>Po-Ju Chen</i>	University of Central Florida, USA
<i>Yang-Su Chen</i>	University of Nevada Las Vegas
<i>Rouxelle De Villiers</i>	Auckland University of Technology, New Zealand
<i>Liangcheng Feng</i>	City University of Macau
<i>Anestis K. Fotiadis</i>	Zayed University
<i>Xinhua Guan</i>	Guangdong University of Finance and Economics, Guangdong, China
<i>Anna Hammershøj</i>	University College of Northern Denmark
<i>Tzung-Cheng (T.C.) Huan</i>	National Chiayi University, Taiwan
<i>Rachel A. Jared</i>	University of Central Florida
<i>Srirung Klinjan</i>	National Chiayi University
<i>Eusebio C. Leou</i>	City University of Macau
<i>Yaoqi Li</i>	Sun Yat-sen University
<i>Jarom Murphy</i>	Hamilton, New Zealand
<i>Rüdiger Niemz</i>	FH Salzburg, Austria
<i>Aunyporn Nuntapat</i>	National Chiayi University
<i>Tom O'Hara</i>	University of Waikato, New Zealand
<i>Tze-Jen Pan</i>	National Penghu University of Science and Technology
<i>Tara Redding</i>	University of Central Florida
<i>Korey Rubenstein</i>	University of Waikato, New Zealand
<i>Gina Ryan</i>	University of Waikato, New Zealand

<i>Berit E. Simonsen</i>	University College of Northern Denmark
<i>Nikolaos Stylos</i>	University of Bristol, Bristol, UK
<i>Irina L. F. Tang</i>	City University of Macau
<i>Chin-Fa Tsai</i>	National Chiayi University
<i>Chris A. Vassiliadis</i>	University of Macedonia
<i>Jiangeng Yeh</i>	City University of Macau
<i>Cheng Zhang</i>	City University of Macau

EDITORIAL BOARD

SERIES EDITOR

Arch Woodside
Boston College
arch.woodside@bc.edu

Editorial Board Members

Kenneth Backman
Clemson University
Clemson, SC, USA
frank@clemson.edu

Monica Chien
The University of Queensland
Queensland, Australia
m.chien@uq.edu.au

Maria Dolores Alvarez Basterra
Gran Via 49 – 5 Izda
48011 Bilbao, Vizcaya, Spain
alvarezm@boun.edu.tr

Antonia Correia
University of Algarve
Portugal
ahcorreia@gmail.com

Stephen Boot
stephen.boot@nottingham.ac.uk

John Crotts
College of Charleston
Charleston, WV, USA
crottsjohn@gmail.com

Jenny Cave
University of Waikato
Hamilton, New Zealand
jenny.cave@waikato.ac.nz

Alain Decrop
University of Namur, Belgium
alain.decrop@unamur.be

Giacomo Del Chiappa
Department of Economics and
Business, University of Sassari
CRENoS and RCEA, Via Muroni, 25
07100 Sassari (SS), Italy
gdelchiappa@uniss.it

Joana Dias
Av 5 de Outubro, 66, 10 D, Faro,
Algarve, Portugal
faroflats@gmail.com

Joana Afonso Dias
*Lecturer in INUAF, Instituto
 Superior Dom Afonso III
 Research Executive
 Gabinete Académico de Investigação
 e Marketing
 Algarve, Portugal
 joanadia@gmail.com*

Rachel Dodds
*Associate Professor
 Ted Rogers School of Hospitality &
 Tourism Management
 Ryerson University, 350 Victoria
 Street, Toronto, ON M5B 2K3
 r2dodds@ryerson.ca*

Eyal Ert
*Faculty of Agriculture Food and
 Environment
 Rehovot 76100, Israel
 eyal.ert@mail.huji.ac.il*

Li-Yia Feng
*Teacher Education Center, National
 Kaohsiung University of Hospitality
 and Tourism
 Kaohsiung, Taiwan
 liyiafeng@gmail.com*

Helena Reis Figueiredo
*School of Management, Hospitality
 and Tourism
 University of Algarve, Faro, Portugal
 hreis@ualg.pt*

Anestis K. Fotiadis
*Zayed University, College of
 Communication and Media Science
 Abu Dhabi, UAE
 Anestis.Fotiadis@zu.ac.ae*

John Goutas
 j.goutas@murdoch.edu.au

Sandra Goutas
*Curtin University
 Perth WA 6845, Australia
 sandra.goutas@curtin.edu.au*

Kirsten Holmes
*Curtin University
 Perth WA 6845, Australia
 k.holmes@cbs.curtin.edu.au*

Ute Jamrozny
*1025 Opal Street
 San Diego, CA 92109, USA
 ujamrozny@alliant.edu*

Azilah Kasim
*Tourism and Hospitality, Universiti
 Utara Malaysia
 Sintok, Kedah 06010, Malaysia
 azilah@uum.edu.my*

Metin Kozak
*School of Tourism and Hospitality
 Management
 Dokuz Eylul University
 Foca, Izmir Turkey
 m.kozak@superonline.com*

Robert Li
*University of South Carolina, 701
 Assembly Street, Columbia,
 SC 29208, USA
 robertli@mailbox.sc.edu*

Patrick Liao
*17 Annerley Street, Toowong,
 Queensland 4066, Australia
 bid@iinet.net.au*

Cui Lixin
Beijing Institute of Technology
No. 5 Zhongguancun South Street,
Haidian District, China
cuilixin@bit.edu.cn

Martin Lohmann
Leuphana University
Lueneburg, Wilschenbrucher Weg 84
D-21335 Lüneburg (Germany)
m.lohmann@leuphana.de

Drew Martin
University of Hawaii at Hilo
HI, USA
drmartin@hawaii.edu

Josef Mazanec
MODUL University
Vienna, Austria
josef.mazanec@wu.ac.at

Scott McCabe
Nottingham University Business
School
Jubilee Campus
Nottingham NG8 1BB, UK
scott.mccabe@nottingham.ac.uk

Taketo Naoi
Tokyo Metropolitan University
Japan
naoi-taketo@tmu.ac.jp

Girish Prayag
Department of Management,
Marketing and Entrepreneurship
University of Canterbury
Christchurch 8140, New Zealand
girish.prayag@gmail.com

Piyush Sharma
Curtin University
Perth WA 6845, Australia
piyush.sharma@curtin.au.edu

Theodoros A. Stavrinoudis
Department of Business
Administration
University of the Aegean, Greece
tsta@aegean.gr

Rouxelle De Villiers
Faculty of Business & Law
Auckland University of Technology
Auckland, New Zealand
rdevilli@aut.ac.nz

Su Yahu
No. 194, Jiouru 2nd Road,
Sanmin Chiu
Kaohsiung City 807, Taiwan
yahuisu@mail.nkuht.edu.tw

Şükrü Yarcan
Fulya Sitesi A Blok A Kapı No. 3
D. 10, Süleyman bey Sokak
Gayrettepe Beşiktaş 34349,
İstanbul, Turkey
yarcan@superonline.com

Endo Yosuke
〒192-0362
東京都 Hachioji-shi, 31-13-104
Matsuki, Japan
tmu.tourism.endo@gmail.com

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PREFACE

Arch G. Woodside

A drama includes an inciting (usually unexpected) incident that a protagonist reacts to; one or more natural, policy, or human antagonists is identifiable; a psychological and usually a physical journey (process/action) resulting in some outcome; a search for, and the possibility of receiving, help occurs that enables the protagonist to move toward a desirable milestone or outcome; milestones necessary to complete to reach an outcome are observable; world and personal blocks temporarily or permanently prevent the protagonist from reaching an objective or completing milestones; doubt, surprises, and suspenseful moments occur about achieving an objective; sometimes pauses, reflections, insights, and humorous asides by participants occur; an undesirable or desirable ending concludes the drama. A hospitality service drama (HSD) includes all these ingredients as they occur in hospitality service contexts. An HSD is a hospitality service encounter on steroids. HSDs include dialog and behaviors beyond the expectations and programmed routines that customers and service providers expect to experience. Yet, it seems that everyone we know tells stories of HSDs. Experiencing HSDs can have huge impacts on customers' beliefs, attitudes, and intentions toward a service provider.

Trade Tales, *Advances in Culture, Tourism, and Hospitality Research*, Volume 14 describes and explains HSDs. Volume 14 includes 26 original first-person customer experience stories of problems/opportunities and outcomes, with most stories including customer and sales/service associate dialogues. The volume includes experiential exercises for the reader to hone her/his skills in managing HSDs – a multiple-choice exercise following each story. The exercises ask the reader to select a solution to the problem/opportunity in the story. Each chapter includes a story, offers a learning exercise, and both surface and deep assessments of plot, climax, and outcome of the story as well as a critical review (an arm's length independent review by a researcher of the story). This volume describes customers' reports of the big and

little things that happen when customers and sales/service associates talk and co-create a buying and/or consumption and selling–service experience. The volume also offers a general descriptive theory of storytelling narratives of customers’ and sales/service associates’ HSDs. Chapters include stories written by Asian, European, New Zealand/Pacific Rim, and North American customers. With the select-a-solution exercise in each chapter, this volume provides sense-making training in solving moments-of-truth problems. The volume describes the seemingly little as well as big things that cause happy/sad customer assessments as well as unintended consequences. This volume increases the reader’s abilities to detect nuance in multiple international contexts and to create workable solutions for HSDs.

CHAPTER 1

CUSTOMER AND HOSPITALITY SERVICE-PROVIDER DRAMAS: STORIES, EXPERIENTIAL LEARNING EXERCISES, AND DEEP ASSESSMENT

Arch G. Woodside, Po-Ju Chen, Rouxelle De Villiers
and Tzung-Cheng (T.C.) Huan

ABSTRACT

This chapter is the introduction to the 26 trade-tale case studies in the present volume. Face-to-face, telephone, and written interactions between salespersons and customers and service-providers and customers occur frequently in everyday life. Successful communications and outcomes are likely to occur for the majority of these encounters. However, most customers, salespersons, and service-providers are likely to be able to identify personal examples of miscommunications and bad outcomes. Most of the trade-tale cases in this volume include in-depth cases of miscommunications and bad outcomes. [Chapter 1](#) is a call for achieving “requisite variety” and in-depth examination of such cases. All the cases in this volume present deep dives into

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describing and understanding details in the interaction processes and alternative versus actual outcomes of each case study. The numerous and varied case studies along with the deep interpretations of the processes and outcomes provide useful steps for achieving the objective of requisite variety. Chapter 1 provides details of the topics and coverage of requisite variety.

Keywords: Buyer–seller interaction; case; encounter; outcomes; requisite variety

INTRODUCTION: TRADE TALES ARE HOSPITALITY SERVICE DRAMA ENACTMENTS

Most hospitality and sales service encounters are semi-routine, programmable scripts that include talk and observable behaviors that lead to predictable outcomes. For example, a customer walks into a hotel, moves to the “front desk” to check-in; the hospitality service-provider (HSP) assigns a room, collects credit card information, answers questions, provides the customers with room keys, calls for a porter to help with baggage if necessary, takes a photo of the customer’s passport, and so on. Routine scripts include multiple programs of alternative behaviors that inform appropriate talk and behavior when a blockage occurs to the principal routine. For example, a hotel may have an alternative script that the HSP is trained to use when a customer with a reservation arrives at the front desk to check-in but no guest rooms are available. A “hospitality service drama” (HSD) occurs when a breakdown occurs in programmed script and/or an unexpected “inciting incident” occurs for which no programmed script is available.

A drama includes an inciting (usually unexpected) incident that a protagonist reacts to; one or more natural, policy, or human antagonists is identifiable; a psychological and usually a physical journey (process/action) resulting in some outcome begins; a search for, and the possibility of receiving, help occurs that enables the protagonist to move toward a desirable milestone or outcome; milestones necessary to complete to reach an outcome are observable; world and personal blocks temporarily or permanently prevent the protagonist from reaching an objective or completing milestones; doubt, surprises, and suspenseful moments occur about achieving an objective; sometimes, pauses, reflections, insights, and humorous asides by participants occur; an undesirable or desirable ending concludes the drama.

A customer and HSP encounter takes a dramatic turn when one or more participants perceive their encounter to include an inciting incident

disrupting the routine completion of a service process. Hospitality service dramas frequently include conversations (viewable as turn-taking scripts of texts) among customers, frontline HSPs, and sometimes hospitality service managers (HSMs) in attempts to frame, understand, and describe the inciting incident, overcome blocks, resolve conflicts, propose solutions, reach agreements, and move the action forward to achieve milestones and an ultimate objective. The present volume in the ACTHR series provides foundational case studies for constructing a theory of HSDs. The volume includes 25 HSDs in several contexts: airline services, hotel services, retail store service, internet purchases, insurance claim service, dental service, hospital service, and so on.

ACHIEVING REQUISITE VARIETY

The study of real-life hospitality service enactments is intended to help hospitality management to achieve the “requisite variety” (Ashby, 1958; Weick, 1987) necessary for managing hospitality dramatic turns effectively. Weick’s (1987) propositions are relevant for the study of HSDs that include inciting incidents. “Inciting incidents” are unexpected and/or extraordinary talk and/or acts that one or both parties in an exchange notice, store in memory, and/or offer a usually unplanned response – inciting incidents include most exchanges identifiable as service failures. Service failures are not the only category of inciting incidents. Dramatic weather events (e.g., hurricane), loss of a wallet or purse, providing exceptional beneficial service, and tripping and falling down are also likely to be perceived by actors in a service exchange as inciting incidents.

Service failures as inciting incidents centering on the actors in the service exchange occur because humans who operate and manage complex systems are themselves not sufficiently complex to sense and anticipate the problems generated by those systems.

This is a problem of “requisite variety,” because the variety that exists in the system to be managed exceeds the variety in the people who must regulate it. When people have less variety than is requisite to cope with the system, they miss important information, their diagnoses are incomplete, and their remedies are short-sighted and can magnify rather than reduce a problem. (Weick, 1987, p. 112)

The editors of the present volume propose that achieving requisite variety through case study and role-playing is possible and taking action to design creatively potential server–customer encounters is fundamental to providing

exceptionally high-quality service delivery. Achieving requisite variety is slow and painful if done only following responses to incidents of prior service failures. On April 9, 2017, United Airlines attempted to make seats available for a flight crew for a flight that needed to be in Kentucky for flights the next morning. The airline tried to get volunteers, but when no one stepped forward, four people were selected and told to leave. Two complied, but Dr. Dao refused, saying he had patients to see the next day. Multiple passengers made videos of the physical confrontation that followed, in which Dr. Dao was dragged down the aisle by his arms. He was later seen returning to the flight with a bloodied mouth in a state of confusion. He was eventually removed in a stretcher (Bromwich, 2017b).

Newly released police documents claim that Dr. David Dao, the passenger who was shown being dragged off a United Airlines flight on April 9 in widely shared videos, behaved violently toward the officers removing him, but his lawyer dismissed this account as “utter nonsense.” The phone videos taken by other passengers set off waves of criticism and multiple statements from the airline, each more apologetic than the last. The police reports were released Monday afternoon in response to a freedom of information request filed by *The New York Times* and other news organizations. The releases included audio of the original call to the Chicago Department of Aviation police, personnel reports about the officers, and an incident report that appeared to blame Dr. Dao for his own injuries. His lawyer, Thomas Demetrio, has said that his client may need surgery after suffering a concussion, a broken nose and two lost teeth, which were knocked out. (Bromwich, 2017b)

Achieving requisite variety includes several steps. *Trade Tales* (this volume in the ACTHR series) is a step in creating a rich extensive series of case studies of service failure and additional inciting incidents, including detailed steps in their enactments but one step in achieving requisite variety. Role-playing the enactments with alternative responses within and during the enactments is another step. Creating constructing alternative solutions to specific moments leading to defusing or intensifying the positive versus negative direction of the action is another step. Role-playing with extemporaneous versus planned responses to the unfolding action is a third step. An additional step is “damage control.” “Damage control” is designing and enacting response options to various degrees and kinds of bad outcomes to service failures and additional inciting incidents – and actually role-playing the damage control options as mini-dramas and observing responses one-self and additional audience members to these mini-dramas. Achieving requisite variety includes vigilance and creativity in preventing the occurrence of service failures and bad responses during additional categories of inciting incidents. Asking “What if...”

questions and enacting outcomes to such questions is a simple and useful tool to partly achieve requisite variety. “What if a selected customer refuses to give up his seat after boarding so that one of our employees can be seated to get to work on time in another city? What is our next step?” This “what if” question and other “what if” questions were likely never asked or role-played in hospitality training programs at United Airlines. Subject to confirmation by research, achieving requisite variety is a very limited training topic in firms in the service and hospitality industries.

Here are some of the steps that United Airlines employees and senior managers anticipate following Dr. Dao’s removal from a United Airlines flight on April 9, 2017.

United Airlines, which is reviewing its policies after the violent removal of a passenger from a flight last week, says it will no longer allow employees to take the place of civilian passengers who have already boarded overbooked flights. “We issued an updated policy to make sure crews traveling on our aircraft are booked at least 60 minutes prior to departure,” a spokeswoman, Maggie Schmerin, wrote in an email on Sunday. “This is one of our initial steps in a review of our policies.” Ms. Schmerin confirmed the validity of a memo dated April 14, which was published by TMZ that ordered the new policy. She said the change was meant to ensure that episodes like what happened last week “never happen again.” She also emphasized a previously announced change that law enforcement officials would no longer be asked to remove passengers who do not pose immediate security threats. (Bromwich, 2017a)

THE HOSPITALITY SERVICE DRAMAS AS EXPERIENTIAL LEARNING EXERCISES

Each of the 25 case studies include an HSD, a surface and deep assessment of the HSD, a multiple-choice experiential learning exercise for the reader to complete, an assessment of each of the multiple-choice options, and, for most cases, an editorial commentary of the drama by one of the editors of this volume. The 25 HSDs include experiential learning exercises whereby the reader is asked to consider several alternative solutions to the major dilemma appearing in the case study – before reading the case author’s assessment of each of these alternative solutions, the reader is asked to take pencil in hand and select a solution by circling or ticking one of the options as the one to apply. Following completing the multiple-choice exercise assignment, the reader is invited to compare and contrast her/his recommended solution to the case author’s assessment of all alternative solutions.

CONTRIBUTIONS

This volume informs hospitality managers, frontline service-providers, customers, students, and educators of the need to build highly reliable organizations (HROs) – firms that construct and use meta-scripts, that is, scripts for managing and solving hospitality dramas, that is, situations that fall outside currently operational and programmed scripts. Reading and participating in experiential learning exercises are the steps toward building up knowledge and skills necessary for acquiring the requisite variety for effectively solving HSDs. The core proposition is that constructing HSD theory and practice enriches hospitality management as a discipline. Weick's (1987, p. 113) further wisdom supports this proposition:

A system that values stories and storytelling is potentially more reliable because people know more about their system [operations], know more of the potential errors that might occur, and they are more confident that they can handle those errors that do occur because they know about other people have already handled similar errors.

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