

Executive summary

Christmas trees, holly, and other Christmastime symbols are commonly encountered in service settings during the lead-up to Christmas. These symbols are typically displayed for decorative purposes, but do they also exert a more general influence on how individuals evaluate bad interactions with service workers? Results from seven experiments suggest they do. In the presence of Christmas symbols, individuals who experience bad service from a service worker become less harsh in their evaluation of that service encounter. This effect emerges because Christmas symbols activate religious beliefs, and the religious belief implicated by a bad, personally-experienced service encounter is forgiveness. However, when bad service is observed (rather than personally experienced) and the recipient of that bad service is a vulnerable member of the community, the effect of Christmas symbols is to activate religious beliefs about the importance of justice, increasing the harshness with which such service encounters are evaluated. Christmas symbols consequently act as a double-edged sword: whether they soften or harden evaluations of bad service depends on whether the recipient of that bad service is oneself or a vulnerable member of the community.

Several factors influence whether this set of effects emerge. For example, Christmas symbols will only influence service evaluations among individuals who have made an association between Christmas and religion, such as those raised in a Christian household. Similarly, Christmas symbols only influence evaluations of bad service encounters; no equivalent gains in service evaluations are found when the service being evaluated is good.

From a theoretical perspective, these findings suggest that religion is not just a demographic variable that exerts a constant, unidimensional effect on service evaluations. Instead, the effects of religion are both dynamic and multifaceted, with the influence of religion varying as a function of whether religion has been activated (such as by Christmas symbols) and the type of religious belief implicated by the service encounter (such as forgiveness or justice). And while the presence of Christmas symbols does not completely overturn negative perceptions of bad service, they do exert a robust and consistent softening effect on a range of managerially-relevant outcomes, including satisfaction with the service encounter, intention to switch service providers, and intention to warn others about the service provider.

The study findings also offer more quotidian implications. Findings from the Pew Research Centre suggest that 85.6% of the US population were raised in a Christian household, suggesting that how the overwhelming majority of US residents evaluate bad service encounters may be influenced, at least in part, by the presence or absence of Christmas symbols. Something to think about the next time a service worker treats you rudely beneath the lights of a Christmas tree...