

## Happy Campers – and Other Dissatisfied Customers

By Amanda Jaffe-Katz

"Customers may always feel they are right," says Prof. Anat Rafaeli of the Davidson Faculty of Industrial Engineering and Management, "but they are certainly not always happy. In part, this is because constraints of time and organizational policies limit what employees can do, which is frustrating for customers, and too often creates a classic 'shoot the messenger' response."

Rafaeli, the Yigal Allon Chair of People at Work, studies expressions of emotion in organizations. Despite general perceptions, she says, emotions play an integral role in modern workplaces. And organizational requirements regarding emotions are the focus of Rafaeli's research. Some three decades ago, she introduced the concept known today to all researchers in her area as Emotional Labor. It refers to the labor of displaying emotions expected and needed for the promotion of organizational goals.

Emotional Labor is often required in jobs with customer-service interactions. Examples are flight attendants and nurses, who must show friendliness and empathy respectively; less obvious examples are police officers and interrogators who must be firm with suspects, and empathetic with victims and witnesses. Rafaeli's research shows that training and experience help employees to regulate their expression of organizationally required emotions.

"Note the distinction," Rafaeli counsels, "expressed emotions are not necessarily felt emotions. We have research on the

dissonance between what employees feel and what they must display, and the implications of such dissonance."

An assumption in customer service is that customers must be satisfied, and, further, that if employees are nice, customers will surely be satisfied. This does not always work, and indeed customers are often frustrated and angry.

"The moment of truth is when employee meets customer," Rafaeli continues. "Wait time is the best predictor of customer anger."

Yet, the research shows that customer anger causes employee "depletion." This means that employees who encounter angry customers make more mistakes, experience greater burnout, become more fatigued, and furthermore, these effects are carried over into subsequent customer interactions. A worldwide feature of call-center staff, whose average turnover time is a mere 12 to 14 months, is the sentiment that, "everyone is hostile to me."

"This means that companies expend resources in recruitment and training, and that customers are more likely to encounter new, inexperienced employees. The solutions of extrinsic rewards, such as salary or perks, are not very helpful when it comes to the frustration and burnout of handling angry customers," Rafaeli explains.

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Rafaeli believes that rather than manage the employee, management should reduce the reasons that cause customer anger, such as waiting, and think about managing the customer. "Providing the customer with more information can be very helpful," she says. "In research we did in a hospital emergency room, information about why waits are long made people feel less frustrated and less angry with the hospital staff, be it nurse, administrator, or doctor."

"Technion has a great graduate program in Behavioral Sciences and Management," claims Rafaeli, "and 80 percent of my recent work has been done with these students." This includes the above work on customer anger. And recent research, with Yakir Rosenfeld and Daniel Altman, examines emotion in a large-scale organizational social network, in an international high-tech company.

Rafaeli is now working on a new interdisciplinary project through the Jacobs-Technion Cornell Institute, funded by AOL, where she will extend this research. The long-term goal is to develop "virtual frontline agents" – replacing people with technology – so service will be summoned through chats, Twitter, and other social media. The design of the interaction between customers and such virtual agents is a lot of work, and Rafaeli is joining forces with colleagues from the Faculties of Computer Science and Electrical Engineering toward this goal.

## Technion International HQ

Aside from her research and teaching, Prof. Anat Rafaeli heads Technion International (TI) – the center for all international initiatives held at the Haifa campus. She sees it as a tremendous opportunity for Technion to position itself in the global education arena. "We get lots of requests and offer a variety of programs for students from all over the world. This is the beauty of the operation but also the challenge. The Technion culture needs to adapt," she says. "Our focus is not research but also not just teaching. There is something else here, namely, cultivating international relations that are student-centered."

TI's first program was a BSc in Civil Engineering, taught in English, with the third cohort graduating in August 2015. That same month, Chinese students from Guangdong

Province – as a prelude to establishing the Guangdong-Technion Institute of Technology (GITI) – will commence a new undergraduate program, also taught in English, in Chemical Engineering with a minor in Environmental Technologies. "The Li Ka Shing Foundation initiative for Guangdong would not have been possible without the proven successful infrastructure of TI," says Rafaeli.

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A third TI program is a first year in Russian, during which students also study Hebrew. "Graduates of this introductory year must satisfy two requirements: an adequate knowledge of Hebrew and the ability to be accepted into a regular Technion program from their second year," Rafaeli explains.

TI also offers a variety of short-term programs, which span periods of two weeks to one year and include students on research internships and "Study Abroad." A new development is customized study tours for students from a specific university.

Finally, Rafaeli helps develop opportunities for international graduate students and postdoctoral research visitors in collaboration with the Jacobs Graduate School and the VP for Academic Affairs. "There is both supply and demand for international people of this caliber," she says, "and since the focus is research, language is less of a constraint. These efforts are also essential for our development of the Guangdong faculty."

"In five years, we hope for a rise of 30 percent in the number of international postdocs and a 20 percent increase in undergraduate and graduate students," Rafaeli concludes.

Prof. Anat Rafaeli, head, engages with Technion International students.