

# Smiling and waving

## Petrol attendants' use of emotional labour

David du Toit



What lies behind the friendly face of a petrol attendant?

**David du Toit** unpacks the management marketing science behind garage workers' behaviour.

South Africa is one of only a few countries in the world that employs petrol attendants. An estimated 55 000 to 60 000 petrol attendants work on the forecourts of around 5 000 petrol stations in South Africa. As a result, the petrol industry in South Africa is characterised by an extremely competitive environment.

Between ten and 20 petrol attendants are employed by managers of petrol stations, but it depends on the size of the petrol station. At the time of the study in 2009, all the petrol attendants in Stellenbosch received R13.13 per hour. According to the bargaining council agreement they are allowed to work for 45 hours a week and if they work more than that, they receive one and a half times more in wages per extra hour.

On public holidays and on Sundays, they receive double pay. On average, a petrol attendant in Stellenbosch receives between

R2 500 and R2 800 per month in wages.

The actual service that petrol attendants deliver, that is, filling vehicles with petrol, checking the oil and water and washing the windscreen is generally similar at all petrol stations. The job is very monotonous. When a car drives in, the petrol attendant guides the customer to an open pump, greets him/her with a friendly smile and asks what they need.

After the customer pays the attendant, s/he has to smile again and bid the customer farewell. This is the standard procedure for petrol attendants' jobs and they do it every day in eight to ten hour shifts. However, a petrol attendant's job does not only involve physical labour, but also emotional labour.

### IMPORTANCE OF EMOTIONAL LABOUR

The term, emotional labour, refers to the management of appropriate emotions such as friendliness during customer interaction in exchange for commercial gain such as tips.

From management's perspective, it is important to have employees that engage in emotional labour, because it leads to a philosophy of 'customer for life', but also to good work performance by employees. This in

turn improves the organisation's success and competitive advantage. Often customers are only exposed to front-line service workers and so they judge the organisation in terms of the quality of the interaction and service delivered. If customers are satisfied, they may return, which is profitable for the organisation.

Unlike many other goods where product quality or diversity is important in consumer choices, petrol stations are more concerned with their image and branding, than with the product itself.

One way to improve the image of the petrol station is to take care of customer service. This means that the role of the petrol attendants as the face of the petrol station is critically important, as they carry the responsibility of creating a pleasant service experience.

In fact, the expression of appropriate emotions during face-to-face or voice-to-voice interaction is a job requirement for petrol attendants. Attendants are expected to deliver service with a smile, because this is a commodity to improve organisational and personal profits.

### TYPES OF EMOTIONAL LABOUR

The theorist, Sharon Bolton, identifies various types of emotional



labour that are used by petrol attendants.

Firstly, presentational emotion is managed according to general social rules and not by the organisation. This means that without knowing what the rules of the organisation are, an employee is already prepared with a basic understanding of how to behave.

Secondly, prescriptive emotion is managed according to organisational and professional rules of conduct, which the employee learns through training and socialisation.

Thirdly, pecuniary emotion management is when emotions are managed for commercial gains.

Petrol attendants use all three types of emotional labour.

In terms of presentational emotion management, one petrol attendant stated that he 'does not fight with his colleagues or with the manager, because he is proud to be a petrol attendant.'

In terms of prescriptive emotion management, attendants stated that they are given a 'pre-established script, which states how they

should regulate and display emotions when interacting with customers.' Furthermore, managers also stated that they train petrol attendants to 'remain calm and quiet' when customers are offensive towards them.

One attendant, for example, said that he has to say, 'Ja, jammer meneer (Yes, sorry sir) even if the customer is wrong. This puts a lot of stress on petrol attendants, because they have to express certain emotions such as friendliness and calmness and suppress others such as anger and frustration.

Petrol attendants also use pecuniary emotion management by creating a desirable appearance and a pleasant emotional environment by controlling their own as well as the customer's emotions by means of display rules set out by the organisation.

#### ORGANISATIONAL PROFITS

However, the ability to use emotional labour as a commodity to improve organisational profits starts even prior to employment. The selection of personnel by managers was identified as a crucial variable for organisational success.

One manager stated, for example, that he employs petrol attendants that are able to communicate in both English and Afrikaans, because 'it does not help if a petrol attendant is recruited in an Afrikaans community, but cannot understand a word of Afrikaans.'

Another manager said that he employs petrol attendants that are 'well presented, appear neat and have a positive facial expression.' Attendants are thus recruited in terms of how well they are able to use pecuniary emotion management, which is related to organisational success and profits.

Petrol attendants hold similar beliefs as managers in terms of

emotional labour and organisational success. One petrol attendant stated, for example, that 'it is part of my job and that everybody expects me to be friendly to customers'. This is an example of prescriptive emotion management, where petrol attendants are prescribed how to manage their emotions according to the prescribed rules of the petrol station.

However, petrol attendants also acknowledged that they manage their emotions for commercial gains for their employer. One said that 'friendly customer service results in customer return, which is good for business'. Another stated that 'it is good for this petrol station if customers are happy, because... you see... they will run away if they are not happy'. This is an example of pecuniary emotion management, where attendants manage their emotions for commercial gains for their employer.

However, by engaging in pecuniary emotion management, petrol attendants also benefit themselves financially.

### PERSONAL PROFITS

All petrol attendants know that if they smile and are friendly to customers, they may receive tips or rewards from managers. On average, attendants in Stellenbosch receive between R20 and R50 tips per day.

However, not all customers give them tips. Attendants, for example, stated that tourists are more willing to give tips than local customers. One said that he identifies a tourist by 'looking at the registration number of the customer's car' and 'by the way they speak'.

The race of customers also influences attendants' use of emotional labour. Some attendants said they were more willing to offer friendly service to white customers than black or coloured

customers, because white customers are more likely to give tips. However, although they are more willing to deliver friendly service to certain customers, it is expected from them to treat all customers the same.

Attendants use emotional labour in various ways to benefit themselves financially, irrespective of the customer's characteristics.

Firstly, friendly and speedy service delivery usually results in getting tips and other financial rewards from customers and managers. Petrol attendants deliver speedy service by working in teams and share the tips afterwards.

They use the 'power' of language to evoke positive emotions in customers. They pick up on the language of customers and respond accordingly.

Attendants also use certain endearing phrases that demonstrate respect and give the customer status. Some attendants make jokes with some customers, which increases their chances of receiving tips.

Despite receiving tips, attendants receive verbal, material or financial recognition from managers if they deliver good customer service. These rewards include bonuses at the end of the month or gifts such as food hampers, cutlery or crockery. For these reasons, attendants regulate their emotions according to Bolton's pecuniary emotion management, which is profitable both to their employers and themselves.

### SURVEILLANCE

However, in order to make sure that attendants deliver friendly customer service, managers monitor their service in various ways.

Firstly, the quality of customer service is monitored through Mystery Motorists. The managers explained that the Mystery Motorist

is a normal customer who goes to petrol stations and who rates the service provided by petrol attendants. These ratings are important, because it can reflect negatively on both the petrol attendant and the manager.

Secondly, service delivery is monitored by customer feedback. If customers are not satisfied with the service, the station may lose that customer as well as other potential customers.

Also, managers periodically work on the forecourt and monitor the conduct of petrol attendants to ensure good customer service.

Finally, although surveillance cameras are primarily used as a crime prevention tool, managers also use it to monitor petrol attendants' productivity and service. Surveillance therefore puts extra pressure on attendants to deliver friendly customer service.

### CONCLUSION

Although South Africa is one of the few countries in the world using petrol attendants, it is clear that they fulfil an important role. The petrol industry is highly competitive and so this emphasises the importance of attendants and how they contribute to the organisation's success. Emotional labour is therefore part of their job, because by using it, they contribute to the petrol station's success.

However, petrol attendants use emotional labour to benefit themselves too. Customers are more likely to give tips if they delivered friendly service. Service with a smile is related to organisational and personal profits measured in terms of customer return and tips. LB

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