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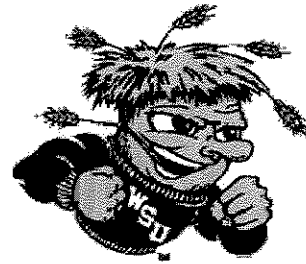
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**Journal Title:** Journal of applied social psychology.

**ISSN:** 0021-9029

**Volume:** 5/1/1995 **Issue:** 25

**Month/Year:** 9**Pages:** 745-751

**Article Author:**

**Article Title:** Rind 'Effect of Server's 'Thank You' and Personalization on Restaurant Tipping'

**Imprint:** Columbia, Md. [etc.], Bellwether Pub. Lt

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**ILLiad TN:** 202772



# Effect of Server's "Thank You" and Personalization on Restaurant Tipping<sup>1</sup>

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Servers in restaurants frequently use the tactic of writing "thank you" on the backs of checks before delivering them to dining parties. Servers also frequently personalize their interaction with dining parties by signing their first name below the gratitude message. The effectiveness of these tactics in increasing tips was examined. In a field experiment conducted in an upscale restaurant in a large Northeastern city, a server wrote on the backs of the checks either nothing, "thank you," or "thank you" plus her first name. The addition of "thank you" increased tip percentages, although personalization by adding her first name had no effect. It was concluded that the commonly employed low-cost tactic of expressing gratitude to customers by writing "thank you" on the check can produce a worthwhile return.

Empirical research on restaurant tipping has examined three general types of factors. One factor has been characteristics of the dining party, such as party size, method of payment, alcohol consumption, and mood as a function of weather (Cunningham, 1979; Freeman, Walker, Borden, & Latané, 1975; Lynn, 1988; Lynn & Latané, 1984). A second factor has been characteristics of the server, such as attractiveness, dress, and gender (Lynn & Latané, 1984; May, 1978; Stillman & Hensley, 1980). A third, and less frequent, focus of study has been on server-diner interactions (Crusco & Wetzel, 1984; Garrity & Degelman, 1990; Hornik, 1993; Lynn & Latané, 1984; Lynn & Mynier, 1993; May, 1978; Stephen & Zweigenhaft, 1986; Tidd & Lockard, 1978).

In the case of server-diner interactions, Crusco and Wetzel (1984), Hornik (1993), and Stephen and Zweigenhaft (1986) showed that a server's touching a diner can increase tipping. May (1978) found that the number of nontask visits by the server is positively related to tip size. Lynn and Mynier (1993) showed that servers got higher tips when they squatted in their initial interaction with customers than when they stood. Tidd and Lockard (1978) found that a server

<sup>1</sup>The authors would like to thank Jennifer Bucy for collecting the data and two anonymous reviewers for comments on an earlier version of this paper.

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got more tips when displaying a maximal smile in her initial interaction with customers than when displaying a minimal smile. Garrity and Degelman (1990) demonstrated that a server's introduction (i.e., the server gives her first name to the dining party on initial contact) can also increase tips. Other studies examining server-diner interactions have yielded null results. Lynn and Latané (1984) and May (1978) found that the quality of service was unrelated to tipping rate.

The current investigation was concerned with another form of server-diner interaction. A common practice among servers is to write "thank you" on the back of the check and then to deliver it to the dining party back-side up so that the first thing the diners will see is the server's expression of gratitude. Upon reflection, this procedure may appear to be out of place because, one might argue, it is the diners who should be thanking the server, not the other way around. Nevertheless, this practice is common, sometimes being embellished with the server's name or a drawing of a happy, smiling face. If writing "thank you" on the check does produce increased tips, then this procedure must be viewed as valuable for servers because of its extremely low cost, and because a large number of servers stand to benefit financially through its systematic employment--the U.S. has approximately 1.3 million waiters and waitresses (*Statistical Abstracts*, 1990), and these servers depend on tips as a major source of income (Lynn & Mynier, 1993; Schmidt, 1985).

Impression-management theory provides a plausible explanation for why servers might be justified in following this procedure. According to impression-management theory, actors manipulate targets' impression of them to increase their influence over the targets for short- or long-term gains (Jones & Pittman, 1980; Tedeschi & Riess, 1981). An expression of gratitude can be viewed as an attempt to increase the actors' likability and appearance of friendliness either through ingratiation (Jones & Pittman, 1980) or by creating an impression of attractiveness (Tedeschi & Riess, 1981). Research has demonstrated that expressing gratitude to targets can increase actors' influence over them (Crano & Sivacek, 1982; Goldman, Seever, & Seever, 1982). Gratitude is likely to increase actors' likability and appearance of friendliness (Trivers, 1971), and, with regard to tipping behavior, a perception of server friendliness can increase tips (Lynn, Zinkhan, & Harris, 1993).

Servers frequently embellish the "thank-you" message by writing their first name below it. This embellishment can also be seen as a type of impression management, in which the servers' salience or strength as a source of social influence is increased (Garrity & Degelman, 1990), or the server becomes more likable and is perceived as more friendly because of personalization (Lynn et al., 1993). This increased salience, or increased perception of friendliness, would then be expected to increase tips.

The purpose of the current study was to examine the effectiveness of these techniques—writing “thank you” and personalizing the server-diner interaction by adding the server’s name. An experiment was conducted in which a server wrote on the back of diners’ checks either nothing, “thank you,” or “thank you” plus her first name. It was predicted, based on impression-management theory, that the addition of a written gratitude and personalization would increase tips over writing nothing. Furthermore, from Garrity and Degelman’s (1990) research, it was expected that personalizing the gratitude message would increase tips over the gratitude message alone.

### Method

#### *Subjects*

Fifty-one dining parties eating lunch at an upscale restaurant in Philadelphia served as subjects. The restaurant was located on the campus of the University of Pennsylvania and attracted a large contingent of faculty and other university personnel. The dining parties consisted of a total of 137 customers, with a mean of 2.69 customers per party ( $SD = 1.41$ ).

#### *Procedure*

The experiment was conducted over a 5-day period from Monday through Friday during the late spring. A female server in her early 20s acted as the experimental accomplice. She worked during the lunch hours which ran from 11:00 in the morning until 3:00 in the afternoon. The 5-day period constituted one complete work week for the server.

Three conditions were used in the experiment. In a control condition, the server delivered the check without writing anything on it. In the thank-you condition, the server wrote “thank you” on the back of the check. And in the third condition (thank you plus name), the server wrote “thank you” and also signed her first name directly below this phrase.

The condition used for each dining party was randomly determined. Just before the server delivered the check, she randomly picked one of three pennies from her pocket with dates 1981, 1982, and 1983. The date selected determined the condition: 1981 was the control condition; 1982 was for thank you alone; 1983 was for thank you plus name. After choosing a coin, the server wrote the appropriate message, if any, on the back of the check, delivered it face down to the dining party, and then had no subsequent interaction with the party. For each dining party, the server recorded the tip size, the bill before taxes, the size of the dining party, and the method of payment (cash or charge).

## Results

As a consequence of the randomization procedure, the 51 dining parties were not exactly evenly distributed among the three conditions. The control condition consisted of 18 parties, the thank-you condition had 16 parties, and the thank you plus name condition had 17 parties. Percentage tips were calculated for each dining party by dividing tip size by bill amount times 100. Results were a mean tip size of 16.28% in the control condition ( $SD = 3.5\%$ ), 18.10% in the thank-you condition ( $SD = 4.2\%$ ), and 18.01% in the thank-you-plus-name condition ( $SD = 2.2\%$ ).

To test the two hypotheses of this study, two orthogonal contrasts were computed and analyzed using the mean percentages in the three conditions. The first contrast compared the thank you mean with the thank-you-plus-name mean, with weights of -1 and 1, respectively. This contrast, which examined whether the addition of the server's name to the "thank you" resulted in higher tips than the "thank you" alone, was not significant,  $t(48) = .08$ ,  $p < .10$ , one-tailed,  $r = .01$ . The second contrast compared the control mean with the means from the two thank-you conditions, with weights of -2, 1, and 1, respectively. This contrast, which examined whether the two experimental conditions resulted in higher tips than the control condition, was significant,  $t(48) = 1.80$ ,  $p < .05$ , one-tailed,  $r = .25$ .

Dining-party size was not related to percentage tip,  $r(49) = -.10$ ,  $p < .10$ , two-tailed. About half of the parties paid by cash ( $n = 26$ ), while the other half paid by credit card ( $n = 25$ ). The mean percentage tips when paying by cash ( $M = 17.0\%$ ) or credit card ( $M = 17.9\%$ ) did not differ significantly,  $t(49) = -1.0$ ,  $p < .10$ , two-tailed.<sup>3</sup>

## Discussion

The results of the experiment indicate that adding "thank you" to the check can increase tip percentages. Many servers make use of this tactic, and the results in this experiment indicate that they are justified in doing so. The

<sup>3</sup>Because the obtained effects for dining-party size and cash versus credit card payment might have been biased by the use of percentage tips as the dependent measure (Lynn & Bond, 1992), corrected percentage tips were computed based on Lynn and Bond's formula: corrected percentage tip =  $(T - A)/B$ , where  $T$  = the tip,  $B$  = the bill, and  $A$  = the  $y$  intercept when predicting  $T$  from  $B$ . Because the value of the  $y$  intercept was almost zero ( $A = -.001$ ), the correlation between dining party size and corrected percentage tips, as well as the difference between corrected percentage tips as a function of cash versus credit-card payment, remained unchanged, and hence nonsignificant.

server's customers in the current study spent a total of \$1,647 over the course of one work week. Based on the tipping percentages for writing nothing on the check versus writing "thank you," the server would have increased her tips from \$268 to \$297 with the simple addition of the expression of gratitude—an increase of \$29, or almost 11%. This percent increase represents a substantial return for the minimal cost of adding a "thank you" to the check. For the 1.3 million servers in the U.S., systematic employment of this technique could mean millions of dollars of additional income annually.

The finding that writing "thank you" on the checks increased tip percentages is consistent with impression-management theory, in which making a favorable impression (i.e., likability and friendliness) was expected to lead to increased influence (i.e., greater tip percentages). Nevertheless, other possibilities for the "thank you" effect need to be considered. It is possible that thanking the customers in advance increased their perceptions of the server's expectations about tips, which led to customer behavior that was consistent with these expectations (cf. Rosenthal, 1977). Another possibility is that the thanking implicitly labeled the customers as good tippers. This mechanism of influence by labeling has been used in previous research to account for gratitude effects (Goldman et al., 1982). Still another possibility is that the thanking created a need on the part of the customers to give something in return for the server's gratitude (cf. Tidd & Lockard, 1978). Future research is needed to evaluate these competing explanations.

Personalizing the server-diner interaction by adding the server's first name to the "thank-you" message did not offer any additional benefits, however. This failure to replicate Garrity and Degelman's (1990) finding may be the result of a number of factors. First, in Garrity and Degelman's experiment, the personalization manipulation occurred at the beginning, rather than at the end, of the server-diner interaction, and it was orally presented rather than handwritten. Second, the "thank you" message may have been more salient than the server's name. It is possible that the expression of gratitude with "thank you" may have raised tips to a ceiling value, which could have limited the personalization effect. Additional research would be required to resolve this issue. In other areas, the experiment found no relation between group size and tip percentages, contradicting earlier research (Freeman et al., 1975; Lynn & Latané, 1984). Also, customers who paid by cash tipped the same as customers who paid with a credit card, contradicting previous research (Garrity & Degelman, 1990; May, 1978).

The current experiment was conducted in an upscale restaurant on a university campus in a large Northeastern city using a young female server. Varying any or all of these factors might produce different results. Future research is needed to examine the generalizability of the findings from this experiment.

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