

The Effect of Patriotic Messages on Restaurant Tipping¹

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This study compared the effectiveness of 2 types of patriotic messages with a warmth/ingratiation message and a control condition on restaurant tipping. Two female food servers waited on 100 parties eating dinner. When diners were finished with their meals, servers left them 1 of 4 messages on their checks: "Have a Nice Day," "God Bless America," "United We Stand," or no message. Results indicated that parties who received the "United We Stand" message left significantly higher tips than did those receiving no message or the "Have a Nice Day" message. No other significant differences were found. These results and their implications are discussed.

Although most U.S. employees are entitled to a standard minimum wage, not all receive it. Food servers in restaurants, for example, frequently earn below minimum wage. Consequently, many of the almost 1.4 million waiters and waitresses in the United States (*Statistical Abstracts*, 2001) depend on tips to make their living. Mims (2002) noted that because current tax rules charge servers based on the value of the meals they serve, an 8% tip is needed just to break even.

From an applied perspective, then, it is clear that an understanding of factors that affect tipping behavior can be crucial to some employees. Lynn and Latané (1984) suggested that such knowledge also would help managers and proprietors make better use of tipping behavior as an indicator of customer satisfaction. From an academic standpoint, the study of tipping behavior might be valuable as well. For example, investigations of influence tactics' effectiveness in real-world contexts can help inform theory and research in persuasion. Too often, scholars in the field of persuasion have focused on strategy preferences or strategy selection while neglecting to examine actual strategy effectiveness (Seiter & Gass, 2004).

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Because the act of tipping and its antecedents can be conceptualized as a persuasive encounter, it is clear that the study of tipping behavior can help meet the need for such research. With that in mind, the purpose of the present study is to examine whether a particular type of influence tactic—that is, the use of patriotic appeals—has an effect on customer tipping behavior.

Review of the Literature

Previous research has indicated that several variables affect tipping behavior. Some of these variables are largely or completely beyond the server's control. For example, customers have been found to leave larger tips when the weather is sunny and when the restaurant is elegant or in an urban area (Crusco & Wetzel, 1984; Cunningham, 1979; Davis, Schrader, Richardson, Kring, & Kieffer, 1998; Garrity & Degelman, 1990; Rind & Strohmetz, 2001). Additional research has suggested that tipping behavior is affected by customer characteristics, including the size of the party, the amount of alcohol consumed, the customer's gender, and the method of payment (Freeman, Walker, Borden, & Latané, 1975; Lynn, 1988; Lynn & Bond, 1992; Lynn & Latané, 1984). Even background music has been shown to affect restaurant tipping behavior (Milliman, 1986).

Despite such findings, research also has indicated that some of the variables affecting tipping behavior are within the control of the server. First, the server's nonverbal behavior might affect tips. For example, research has indicated that a number of nonverbal immediacy behaviors—such as smiling, a light touch on the shoulder, or squatting at eye level with a customer—all tend to increase the tips a food server receives (Crusco & Wetzel, 1984; Davis et al., 1998; Hornik, 1992; Lynn & Mynier, 1993; Stephen & Zweigenhaft, 1986; Stillman & Hensley, 1980; Tidd & Lockard, 1978).

Second, the server's verbal communication can affect tips. For example, Garrity and Degelman (1990) found that servers who introduced themselves by name received significantly higher tips than did those who did not.

Finally, several studies have indicated that servers' written messages can affect tipping behavior. For instance, research by Rind and his colleagues (Rind & Bordia, 1995, 1996; Rind & Strohmetz, 1999) found that servers who wrote "Thank you," drew a happy face, or included a helpful message on the back of their customers' checks earned higher tips than those who did not. Similarly, Rind and Strohmetz (2001) found that servers who wrote a positive weather forecast (i.e., "The weather is supposed to be really good tomorrow") received higher tips than did those who wrote a negative forecast or those who included no forecast.

In addition to identifying variables that affect tipping behavior, researchers have come up with various explanations as to why such variables might be effective. In the study just cited, for example, Rind and Strohmetz (2001) suggested

that increased tipping might have been the result of affective changes. That is, expecting pleasant weather made customers happy or cheerful, which, in turn, made them more generous (Cunningham, 1979; Rind, 1996). Of course, there is a host of other appeals to emotion besides happiness or cheerfulness that may function persuasively. Mortensen (1972), for example, listed several, including guilt, sympathy, pleasure, and, more pertinent to the present study, patriotism.

Although the persuasive potential of patriotic appeals is apparent in certain contexts (e.g., political, military), it is less so in others (e.g., business). Moreover, empirical research on patriotic appeals in business contexts is not only scant but mixed. We found just three related studies. First, Han (1988) found that patriotism positively affected consumers' intention to purchase domestic (vs. foreign) products, but had mixed effects on consumers' cognitions about the nature of products (e.g., how serviceable the product is, product quality). Second, Martin and Rogers (as cited in Pedic, 1990) found that evaluative ratings of a product were lower when following a nationalistic advertisement than when following a nonnationalistic advertisement. Finally, Pedic found that although one nationalistic advertisement was more persuasive than nonnationalistic advertisements, another was not. A follow-up experiment indicated that the persuasiveness of nationalistic ads depended on the patriotism of the audience; that is, nationalistic subjects were persuaded by patriotic ads, and nonnationalistic subjects were not (Pedic, 1990).

Besides the nature of the audience, other factors might play a role in the effectiveness of patriotic appeals. For example, in the United States, patriotic feelings were probably much higher during World Wars I and II than during the Vietnam War, when anti-war demonstrations and other forms of social protest were rampant. More recently, a wave of patriotic fervor swept the nation following the terrorist attacks on September 11, 2001. As Sauer (2001) noted, "American flags and images of Old Glory have sprouted with a vengeance" (p. E-1). Motorists flew American flags on their cars, homeowners hung flags in their homes, businesses placed American flags in their windows, and marketers created a plethora of ads that wrapped themselves in the flag. Public-opinion polls revealed that a surge in patriotic sentiment followed in the wake of the terrorist attacks. According to one Gallup poll, for example (cited in Wellner, 2002), in January 2001, 55% of respondents reported that they were "extremely" proud to be American. That number increased to 65% by June 2002.

Given that our data were collected during the semester immediately following the terrorist attacks, we suspected that patriotic appeals might be especially persuasive. On the other hand, given the inconsistency of previous research in this area, rather than propose a hypothesis, we asked the following research question:

Research Question: Do female food servers who use patriotic messages earn significantly higher tips than those who do not?

Method

Participants

The participants were 100 parties eating dinner at two restaurants in northern Utah. One restaurant belongs to a well-known franchise and can be described as a casual dining establishment in the mid-price range. The other is slightly more expensive and less casual. The number of customers in each party ranged from 1 to 7, with a mean of 2.75 customers per party ($SD = 1.36$) and a total of 275 customers.

Procedure

The data were collected by two communication students, both female and both 22 years old, who worked part-time as food servers. The servers were instructed to treat their customers no differently than they normally would during their regular server duties, except when preparing customers' checks. Specifically, the servers were instructed to leave one of four messages on the back of the checks, representing four experimental conditions: a warmth/ingratiating message, two patriotic messages, and a control condition. In the warmth/ingratiating condition, servers affixed a happy-face sticker (approximately 0.5 in.^A in diameter) and wrote "Have a Nice Day." In the next two conditions, the servers affixed an American flag sticker (about the same size as the happy face) and wrote one of two patriotic messages, either "God Bless America" or "United We Stand." In the control condition, the servers included no messages or stickers on customers' checks. There were 25 parties in each condition.

While interacting with customers, the servers were blind to which of the messages each party would receive until just prior to presenting the check. This ensured that the particular message employed did not affect the quality of the service beforehand. Instead, servers were assigned randomly a sequence of numbers (1 through 4), corresponding to each of the experimental conditions. Upon totaling each check, servers referred to the next number in the sequence and left the appropriate message.

After each party left, the server recorded the size of each party, the total amount of the check, and the total amount tipped.³ The dependent variable was

³Because this study was intended to intrude as little as possible on customers' dining experiences, no formal attempt was made to determine if the manipulation was perceived by the customers. There is anecdotal evidence that it was perceived, however. First, the servers noted that several customers commented on the stickers. Second, although servers behaved the same way regardless of condition, empirical differences were found between conditions, indicating differences in patrons' perceptions. Finally, previous research (see literature review) suggests that such manipulations have worked elsewhere.

Table 1

One-Way ANOVA Comparing Four Types of Messages on Tipping Behavior

	“United We Stand” (<i>n</i> = 25)		“God Bless America” (<i>n</i> = 25)		“Have a Nice Day” (<i>n</i> = 25)		No message (<i>n</i> = 25)	
	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>
H/I/J/K	19.90 _a	4.9 ^H	17.85 _{ab}	4.0 ^I	15.93 _b	2.9 ^J	15.52 _b	3.0 ^K

L *Note.* Means without a common subscript differ significantly. $F^L = 7.10$.

tip size as a percentage of the total bill. This was calculated for each party by dividing the amount of the tip by the amount of the total bill (before taxes) and multiplying by 100.

Results

To investigate the effect of the type of message left on customers’ checks (independent variable) on tip size as a percentage of the total bill (dependent variable) a one-way ANOVA with Student–Newman–Keuls post hoc tests was conducted. As shown in Table 1, the analysis indicates significant differences in tipping behavior between conditions, $F(3, 96) = 7.10, p < .001 (\eta^2 = .182)$.

B Specifically, although tip percentage was not significantly different in the
 C “God Bless America” condition ($M = 17.85, SD = 4.0^B$) than it was in any other
 D/E condition, tip percentage was significantly higher in the “United We Stand” con-
 dition ($M = 19.90, SD = 4.9^C$) than in the ingratiation/warmth condition ($M =$
 $15.93, SD = 2.9^D$) or the control condition ($M = 15.52, SD = 3.0^E$). No other sig-
 nificant differences were found.

Discussion

In some respects, the results of the present study are consistent with previous findings demonstrating that even minor changes in food-server behavior can significantly affect tipping behavior. Specifically, in this investigation a simple, quickly written note, when coupled with an American flag sticker, led to greater tipping by customers. The improvement in tips associated with the “United We Stand” message was just over 4%, compared to the control condition. While a 4% increase in tips may seem a small amount, the improvement is 28.22%, which is clearly nontrivial. Moreover, an additional \$2 to \$5 per shift over a 5-day work week would amount to an additional \$10 to \$25 per week. This could translate into

hundreds of dollars per year, per food server. Given the relative ease with which a written message and sticker can be attached to a check, this strategy appears to offer a highly efficient means by which food servers can increase their earnings.

The improvement in tips, however, was observed for only one of the three stimulus messages employed. While the patriotic message “United We Stand” yielded higher tips compared to the control group, the other patriotic message (“God Bless America”) did not. In addition, the warmth/ingratiation message (“Have a Nice Day”) fared no better than the control condition (i.e., leaving no message at all). These findings raise two intriguing questions regarding the current study: First, why did one patriotic message outperform the control group when the other patriotic message did not; and second, why didn’t the warmth/ingratiation appeal outperform the control condition?

With respect to the first question, three possible explanations are offered. The first centers on Burke’s (1950) concept of identification. According to Burke, *identification* occurs when people are united in substance, sharing attitudes, ideas, possessions, and so forth. Patriotic messages may promote identification by rallying people around their flag and country. In the wake of the terrorist attacks on September 11, the phrase “United We Stand” became a national motto and was therefore closely connected with the wave of patriotic sentiment sweeping the country at the time. The phrase suggests unity and a sense of “we”-ness. It emphasizes that all Americans—food servers and customers alike—are in this together. Thus, the “United We Stand” message may have made customers feel they shared a common bond with their food server, which, in turn, may have led to increased tipping.

On the other hand, the message “God Bless America” may have been less effective at promoting identification. First, it is not as explicit about expressing unity as is the phrase “*United We Stand.*” Second, the phrase “God Bless America” may be less effective in promoting identification because of the religious overtones inherent in the phrase. Rather than promoting unity, the phrase may have been viewed as divisive by some diners who did not want a serving of religion along with their meal.

A second explanation for why one patriotic message outperformed the control group while the other did not focuses on the activation of salient attitudes. O’Keefe (2004), for example, noted that sometimes in order for persuasion to occur, salient attitudes must be activated at the appropriate time. The “United We Stand” message, along with the American flag sticker may have activated patriotic attitudes in customers. Leaving a larger tip, therefore, may have provided customers with an opportunity to demonstrate their patriotism and pride in America. Customers may have felt that the tip they left was not only a measure of their satisfaction with the service, but a measure of their patriotism as well.

Why, then, didn’t the other patriotic message fare as well as the “United We Stand” message when compared to the control group? Perhaps the “United We

Stand” message was especially effective at tapping into customers’ patriotic attitudes because it was more closely connected with September 11. In addition, the phrase “God Bless America” may have activated religious attitudes instead of or in addition to patriotic attitudes, which may have translated into lower tips. One may conjecture that some diners might resent the inclusion of a message with religious overtones by a food server at a public restaurant.

A third explanation for the differential effectiveness of the two patriotic messages centers on the unique demographics of the sample that was studied. Mims (2002), for example, noted that in Utah, where the present study was conducted, the typical diner’s tip is 10%, roughly half the gratuity standard nationally. He suggested this may be because in tithing-conscious Utah, where a large portion of the population are members of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints, even God settles for 10% (Mims, 2002). Therefore, the message “God Bless America” may have suggested to a large portion of customers that 10% was an appropriate amount to leave. In another region of the country, a combination of patriotic and religious messages might prove more effective. Future research should explore this possibility.

A second issue that merits discussion is why the warmth/ingratiation message did not produce significantly more tips than the control condition. Previous research (Rind & Bordia, 1995, 1996) has shown that food servers who write personalized messages on checks or who draw smiley faces receive larger tips. It may be the case that these practices have become so commonplace that they are beginning to “wear out” among restaurant patrons. Through frequent exposure, customers may become desensitized to such strategies. Moreover, it is possible that some customers view the phrase “Have a Nice Day” as hackneyed or the inclusion of a smiley face as a trite gesture. What was once perceived as a genuine display of warmth may now seem somewhat stale. Perhaps such gestures no longer pack as much persuasive punch because they are regarded as part of the standard food-server routine. Messages that rely on warmth or ingratiation may still be highly effective, but perhaps more novel approaches are needed for food servers.

One implication of the present study is that some written messages work better than do others. It would appear worthwhile to investigate other messages that might yield increased tips. A variety of other motivational appeals could be examined and compared, including other patriotic appeals, other warmth/ingratiatory appeals, humorous appeals, quotations or words of wisdom, and seasonal messages, to name just a few. It would also appear worthwhile to investigate the effectiveness of other stickers, stamps, or drawings on checks. For example, a food server might affix a heart or cupid sticker to checks during February, draw a picture of a shamrock on checks during March, or stamp a pumpkin on checks during October.

In addition to examining these issues, as well as overcoming limitations of this study (e.g., only female servers were used, the study was conducted in one

geographical location), future research should examine whether the strategies employed by food servers interact with the nature of a dining establishment. What works well in a casual dining establishment, for example, may not work well in a formal dining establishment. In addition, some slogans or stickers might be viewed as offensive or politically incorrect by some patrons. Some messages might be inconsistent with the theme of a restaurant. For example, a patriotic message might work well at an American steak house, but might not be effective at a restaurant specializing in foreign foods (e.g., Japanese, Indochinese, or Moroccan cuisine). Tailoring the strategy to the particular restaurant appears to be the best approach, but additional research is needed to identify which factors (e.g., price range, type of cuisine, type of clientele) matter the most.

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