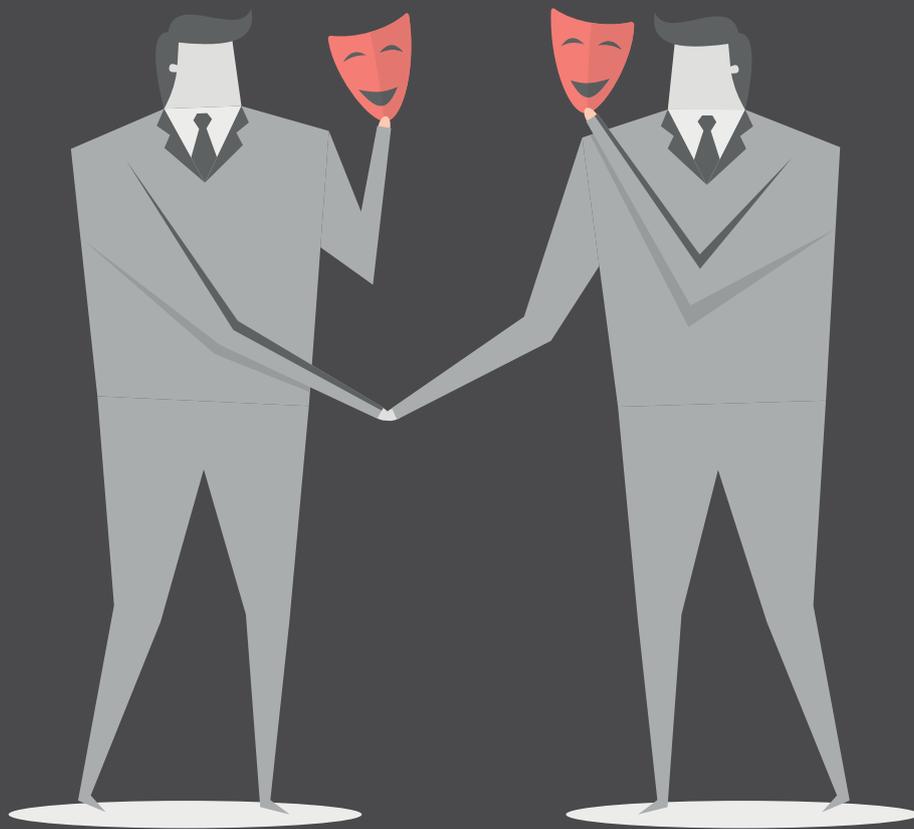


SEX AND HUGS AND SAUSAGE ROLLS

Why aesthetic and emotional labour works so well in the style labour market...





Why aesthetic and emotional labour works so well in the style labour market...

You know it.

We know it.

**Everyone in the bar
and restaurant industry knows it.**

**It's often why customers end up ordering
another drink from that charming
and ever-so-good-looking server, leave a
bigger-than-usual tip for the same reason,
and even go as far as opting for the dessert they
already knew they didn't have room for.**

**In fact, it's probably one of the worst kept
secrets in hospitality...**

Sex sells.

**Or, to give it its official name:
'aesthetic and emotional labour' sells.**



Why aesthetic and emotional labour works so well in the style labour market...

AESTHETIC AND EMOTIONAL WHAT?!

It's more common than we realise. Aesthetic and emotional labour refers to how organisations recruit their customer-facing staff based on their appearance and personality; then training and getting them to dress and act in ways that accentuate their charms and play up to their employers' notions of what customers find desirable.

Why? To ensure that those customers continue to spend more money, keep coming back for more, and tell even more people about what a great time they had.

It's pretty much everywhere – from good-looking shop-floor staff to the specific 'look' of in-flight airline attendants; all the way through to the beautiful people depicted in alcohol and luxury car adverts and the out-and-out sensualisation of the Cadbury's Flake campaigns – all in the name of appealing to customers' senses and desires to promote their brand and drive more sales.

The service sector is particularly known for using sex/aesthetic labour as a selling tool, with the style labour market the area where it's most prominent: i.e. design- and image-driven hospitality organisations such as late-night bars, clubs and restaurants.

TOO GOOD AN OPPORTUNITY NOT TO RESEARCH...

So, when I got the chance to research it, it was a no-brainer – especially as I've spent my whole career in hospitality and my employer at the time had invested heavily in the benefits of the aesthetic/emotional labour model.

They strongly believed that aesthetic and emotional labour was not only extremely positive for customers, but also for the organisation and its employees – helping its bars, clubs and restaurants to really stand out in a crowded market.

In essence, it uncovered what went on behind the scenes and employees' feelings about it – providing both interesting insights not only for the everyday consumer but for employers within the hospitality sector too (such as potential issues around diversity legislation and practical advice around employee welfare).

Here's the low-down on what really goes on behind the scenes in the style labour market ...



Why aesthetic and emotional labour works so well in the style labour market...

DID YOU KNOW THAT...

01 — It's nothing new

Aesthetic and emotional labour/how sex sells isn't a new concept.

In fact, lots has been written about it – just take a look at some of the titles out there and you'll quickly get a sense of what it's all about.

Some are objective and self-explanatory, such as:

- *The Importance of Attitude and Appearance in the Service Encounter in Retail and Hospitality*
- *Atmospherics, Service Encounters and Consumer Decision-Making*
- *Emotional Empathy and Front-Line Employees: Does It Make Sense to Care About the Customer?*
- *The Managed Heart: Commercialisation of Human Feeling*
- *Learning Emotion Rules in Service Organisations and Training in the UK Public-House Sector*
- *At Face Value? Image Consultancy, Emotional Labour and Professional Work*
- *Looking Good and Sounding Right*
- *Keeping Up Appearances*

Whilst others are much more subjective and explicit:

- *It's Just Acting*
- *Flirt a Little More to Climb the Office Ladder*
- *Know How to Please a Man: Studying Customers to Understand Service Work (!)*

02 — It's both an art *and* a science...

Many businesses use aesthetic and emotional labour in a number of ways: to define their brand, improve their commercial prospects and differentiate their value proposition, and, ultimately, meet their customers' wants and needs.

How? By manipulating the service encounter: by only employing staff with the 'right' appearance and demeanours that complement the company's image, then matching them to fit a specific brand within the business.

By doing this, they're making sure to also match the target customer demographics of age, appearance and interests to further create the look and atmosphere that those customers naturally want.

In terms of appearance and demeanour, it could simply mean having a good-looking employee greet a customer with a (albeit forced) smile on their way in, and wishing them a (albeit American) great day on their way out...

Behind all that, though, there's a much more pragmatic side; one where the employee is considered nothing more than a 'component of the service product'.



Why aesthetic and emotional labour works so well in the style labour market...

And, if you think that's a funny way of describing things, there are a lot more where that came from...

For instance, employees in the context of aesthetic and emotional labour have also been referred to as:

- *'human hardware'* and
- *'body capital'*

and their behaviours described as:

- *'commercialising emotion'*
- *'the commodification of embodied dispositions'* (behaviour that's visible and tangible)
- *'aesthetically-geared'* (a deliberate intent to appeal visually and aurally)
- *'creating a publicly observable facial and bodily display'*
- *'expressing organisationally-desired emotions during interpersonal transactions'*
- *'demonstrating continuous dimensions of pleasure, arousal and dominance'*
- *'the ability to enact particular emotional states in order to manipulate clients or customers'*
- *'displaying aesthetic skill in the service encounter'* (looking good and sounding right)
- *'meeting the demands of stakeholders in terms of working appearance, behaviour and management of emotions'*.

See, told you it was a science!

03 — Recruitment is everything

Saying that recruitment is important probably isn't that much of a revelation but in the style labour market, it's not what you know, it's *how good you look*.

That's right: recruitment screening and selection really is based on individuals' aesthetic and social skills rather than their technical abilities. Quite simply, being good-looking in a customer-facing role aids interaction with customers.

Many organisations within this sector will tend to have a specific employee profile whose selection criteria overtly sexualises labour for commercial purposes.

For example, the organisation I worked for at the time would select recruits who were predominately female, pretty with good figures (fitted size 8-10 uniforms), aged 21-30, and who dressed well and had good personal grooming.

We even had a quoted specification that stipulated that *"they should be what boys want to look at, and girls want to aspire to"*!

In addition to being the right weight, height and having a good figure, I've also come across other criteria that listed having a clear and healthy complexion, 'facial regularity' and straight teeth...



Why aesthetic and emotional labour works so well in the style labour market...

Anyone not fitting these criteria would automatically be filtered out as being inappropriate for the company image!

Interestingly, and perhaps to help substantiate this, customers do appear to take into account an employee's physical attributes when assessing the level of service they've received – even to the point of their posture, presence and choice of nail varnish.

Similarly, not displaying the right level of emotional engagement or personality would also contribute to the customer considering it to be a lack of effort and professionalism, particularly if that customer was male.

This industry also requires a high level of sociability and adaptability that enables employees to 'perform' spontaneously in keeping with the organisation's character; usually bubbly, smiley, likeable, energetic and dynamic individuals who ooze confidence and personality and are the life and soul of the party – someone who's unique and stands out from the crowd, and whose individual look shouts style and charisma.

And likewise, customers seem to respond positively to this. However, if there's any inkling that staff are being disingenuous or faking their behaviours, it's not so well received. In reality, this means that staff either need to genuinely be themselves or else engage in such deep acting that the customer doesn't pick up on it!

04 — A lot of investment and training goes into it

The recruitment stage is just the tip of the iceberg.

Once employees start, the real training begins – from staff being directed on how to look, all the way through to acting in a specific manner. It's designed to help them convey the exact image that the organisation wants to project and give an immediate impression of its norms, values and culture.

Known within the industry as 'organisational artefacts', examples include body language and demeanour, deportment, voice/accent, dress sense, grooming and general style.

In the organisation that I used to work for, artefacts were referred to as 'Rule #6' and so ingrained in staff's training that a manager would be able to casually mention it (as a prompt to modify behaviour and maintain standards) and the relevant member of staff would react accordingly – often without customers even being aware.



Why aesthetic and emotional labour works so well in the style labour market...

In fact, it was so convinced of the benefits of aesthetic and emotional labour that we even had a 'Bar School' that trained employees how to engage with customers and look great at all times – all in the name of enabling better influencing skills and customer relations.

Staff were taught how to hold the body and appear confident, own the floor and have presence, as well as tips on applying make-up and how to flirt.

Some of the flirting advice extended to:

- welcoming known customers with two kisses, accompanied by a warm "*Hello darling*" greeting and a hand on their waist to show affection
- holding someone's gaze
- leaning forwards when presenting a drink or delivering the bill (especially for female staff)
- flicking the hair when turning away from the customer
- giving a little wiggle at the till when their back's to the customer
- and, if delivering a birthday cake, sending a guy to a girl and a girl to a guy.

Although a regularly used technique, the level of flirting was also determined by the type of setting and practical considerations. So, in upmarket wine bars it was soft, subtle and chatty; in late-night venues it was outrageously flirty; and in gay venues it was provocatively flirty.

In premium bars, where customers expected high levels of service and engagement, a high level of flirting was the norm (100%); whereas in busy party bars where customers were more interested in quick service, the expectation on staff to flirt was much less (only 40%).

Furthermore, some organisations are so focused on the importance of employees fitting the company's image, they've started hiring Image Consultants to remodel their workforce, with the rationale that if they look the part, not only will they attract more customers, their performance is also likely to improve. This may involve wearing specific outfits to complement the setting and augment the venue's vibe (with an extreme example being *Hooters* getting their staff to dress in skimpy tops and shorts to echo the Floridian beach-babe look).



Why aesthetic and emotional labour works so well in the style labour market...

05 — Employers run the risk of ethical issues and discrimination. Or do they?

Because aesthetic and emotional labour is considered to overtly sexualise employees and demand a particular employee profile, there's always the risk that it's discriminatory and goes against the spirit of diversity.

You only need to look at some of the recruitment ads in the fashion industry suggesting that only 'cool and good-looking' staff should apply, and it'd be easy to think that there'd be a whole wave of discrimination claims heading that company's way.

And yet, in a world where sexism, racism and ageism are rightly called out, this type of body discrimination rarely features. In reality, it seems that employees in those jobs and others who aspire to them both recognise and accept that it's a legitimate requirement/business practice where the end justifies the means.

Taking it a step further, in America, U.S. labour law actually defends organisations' rights to demand that workers aesthetically conform to their respective brand image.

It's also worth remembering that, in some environments, displaying a particular look, body type or physique is deemed essential in helping the person perform a specific role and transmit a certain presence; for instance, having powerful-looking door staff in nightclubs or well-honed bodies dancing on podiums.

06 — Like attracts like...

In the same way that an organisation will match its staff to its clientele, the staff that it tends to attract in the first place are the type of people who already use or naturally aspire to that brand. Essentially, it's a match made in heaven that's then further refined by the recruitment process, because the prospective employees already 'get' the culture and its associated lifestyle.

There's a theoretical model that captures this perfectly. Known as the ASA (Attraction - Selection - Attrition) model, it outlines how 'people are attracted to an organisation based on their personality characteristics being aligned with those of the organisation'. Conversely, if they're not sufficiently in sync, they either won't apply or will recognise very quickly that they're not the right fit.

By attracting the right profile in the first place, employees are more likely to be themselves and not have to put on an act in order to fit in.

As one employee once told me: *"Staff who join can handle it as they know what it's about. Encouraging them to have a laugh at work and flirting with customers is seen as a natural perk of the job."*

And that's a sentiment that seems to be shared by many of their colleagues.



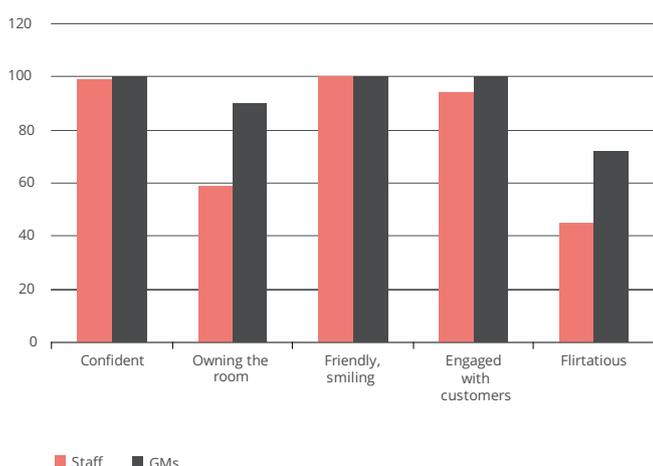
Why aesthetic and emotional labour works so well in the style labour market...

07 — Our survey said...

You can't beat a few facts and figures to help pull everything together, so see what you make of these stats from some of the research done:

100%

The % of both employees and management that rated good interpersonal skills (such as smiling, being friendly and confident) as paramount.



83%

The % of employees and management acknowledging that being good-looking is an important attribute.

80%

The % agreement that specific ways of looking and behaving were driven not just by the organisation and its management, but also by industry expectations, customers and actual staff.

77%

The % of staff that felt they'd been guided and encouraged to look and act in a specific way (although hadn't necessarily received the appropriate level of training to do so).

27%

The % difference between management and employees rating the importance of flirting (72% vs 45%).

15%

The % of employees that felt that the way they look and act at work was put on/not the real them.

Generally, compared to the responses of the employees surveyed, management tended to give a higher weighting and more importance to each of the factors looked at.



Why aesthetic and emotional labour works so well in the style labour market...

08 — And finally, some quick-fire facts...

- Because of good matching, most employees are perfectly happy with the way aesthetic and emotional labour works (and, contrary to what's suggested in the literature, very few experience any negative consequences).
- Some organisations will check out an employee's ability to dance as part of their interview/suitability for the role!
- Aesthetic and emotional labour doesn't just apply to female staff – it's equally prevalent among male employees. (However, because women regard the use of emotions at work to be important, they tend to be more skilled in using emotional labour).
- Style is often favoured more than substance!
- Although employees don't rate flirting as highly as other emotional behaviours, it does result in bigger tips!
- Management's perceptions of employees' attitudes towards aesthetic and emotional labour are very different to those of their employees.
- Having to deal with drunk customers isn't as difficult or annoying as you might think!
- Very little research has been done into customers' perceptions of aesthetic and emotional labour and how they feel about being the source of employees' behaviours.

SO, WHAT NEXT?

Apparently, aesthetic and emotional labour increases sales and will continue to be used because customers love it...

But more can still be done within the industry to learn about what really happens on the ground. Currently, lots of managers continue to rely on instinct as to what works, what others think, and what factors impact staff in their day-to-day roles.

From a practical viewpoint, the industry would benefit from more awareness of the range and degree of skills and attributes needed to perform effective aesthetic and emotional labour.

And certainly, more tailored attribute-testing in the screening and recruitment phase, and subsequent employee training and support stages would be beneficial.

This would allow even better alignment and fit, especially for those who, despite having a natural predisposition to the role, may still need to put on an act because they initially find aesthetic and emotional behaviours a little unnatural and hard to assimilate.



Why aesthetic and emotional labour works so well in the style labour market...

And, finally, no one appears to have spent too much time consulting the customers themselves – to check if the industry's perceived wisdom on what they actually want or perceive as good or bad service is accurate (for instance, identifying whether physical attributes such as body size, shape, height, clothing and facial features really matter); or even whether they regard aesthetic and emotional labour unethical because of how it can be seen to sexualise staff.

THE WORST KEPT SECRET IN HOSPITALITY?

So, there you have it: the low-down on what really happens behind the scenes in hospitality.

As a manager, does any of this surprise you?

And, as a customer wanting to enjoy your night out, do you feel manipulated or motivated by the aesthetic and emotional factors being used?

Either way, it's still the nature of the beast.

And when you consider the best part – that the majority of staff in the style labour market do actually love their jobs – why wouldn't you want to make the most of it and enjoy yourself?

You never know – you might even end up going for that extra cocktail or dessert!

Karen

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