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ORIGINAL EMPIRICAL RESEARCH

Breaking bad news: How frontline employees cope with bad news disclosure to customers

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Abstract

Disclosing bad news to customers during service encounters is an unavoidable, demanding task that can generate significant stress for frontline employees (FLEs). Despite the pervasiveness of bad news disclosure in service contexts, prior research has not explicitly examined how FLEs prepare for or optimize the delivery of bad news, whether to reduce their own work stress or to mitigate its negative impact on customers. Using multidisciplinary literature and depth interviews pertaining to 192 bad news disclosures, this research (1) delineates the concept of bad news disclosure and the types of bad news disclosed in service settings; (2) draws on coping theory to develop an integrative framework of how bad news disclosure unfolds in service encounters and how it affects customer-, employee-, and organization-related outcomes; (3) offers a protocol that FLEs can use to prepare for bad news disclosure and soften the blow for customers; and (4) proposes a research agenda to clarify how service organizations and FLEs should manage bad news disclosure.

Keywords Bad news disclosure · Critical incident technique · Customer experience management · Frontline employee · Coping theory · Service recovery · Conflict communication

Introduction

> *I had a client who asked me to trim a beautiful 80-year-old silver maple tree in her front yard. After a careful inspection of the tree, I determined it was dying and for safety reasons needed to be cut down to remove any threat of it falling on her house. It was quite difficult for the customer to hear this news and for me to disclose it.* [landscaper, male, 33 years old, American]

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Service excellence occurs when organizations manage their touchpoints in ways that optimize both the customer experience (Bolton et al., 2022; De Keyser et al., 2020; Gao et al., 2023) and organizational performance (Baehre et al., 2022). The responsibility for managing these touchpoints typically falls to frontline employees (FLEs), who must adapt their service delivery to meet customers' unique needs (Groth et al., 2019). Arguably, the most stressful moments of truth for FLEs occur when they must disclose bad news to customers during service encounters (hereafter, *bad news disclosure*), as the opening quote illustrates. Bad news disclosure is a pivotal moment during which the FLE reveals unexpected, undesirable, and critical service-related information that has the potential to threaten customer resources and disrupt customer plans (Dubinsky et al., 2011).

In commercial settings, bad news may result from something the customer has (or has not) done, something the organization has (or has not) done, third-party influences, or acts of nature (McColl-Kennedy & Sparks, 2003). For example, airline gate agents might have to disclose to customers that they cannot take their planned flight due to a customer error (e.g., expired passport), third-party failure (e.g., baggage handling subcontractor is on strike), acts of nature (e.g., storms), new governmental regulations (e.g., no large containers of liquids allowed on board), or misfortune (e.g., power outage in the airport). In each of these cases, the information represents bad news for the passenger, because the situation is unwelcome, unexpected, and may have no remedy. In many service contexts, organizations and their FLEs become aware of the bad news first, then must manage the bad news disclosure to their customers—whether they are directly responsible for the situation or not. Even if service recovery is possible, extant service failure and recovery (SFR) literature has not established how FLEs should disclose bad news, which occurs even before they commence any recovery actions.

Bad news disclosure also is not a trivial task, even if it only requires a brief interaction. This frequently unavoidable, emotionally charged, and demanding task can generate high levels of stress for FLEs, which needs to be managed for them to provide an optimal customer experience (Baile et al., 2002; Bies, 2013). Yet the disclosure process often is not well managed by organizations, as acknowledged by both academicians (Bies, 2013; Delcourt et al., 2017) and practitioners (Gallo, 2015; John et al., 2019). For example, FLEs receive little training in how best to disclose bad news and generally have limited time to manage this sensitive process (Belcher, 2023). According to a recent survey (Mantell, 2024), 65% of respondents feel (extremely) uncomfortable delivering bad news, and only 5% feel comfortable and well-equipped to handle such complex encounters. In turn, poorly executed bad news disclosure likely compounds the already distressing, frustrating experience for customers and increases their uncertainty and dissatisfaction (Fallowfield & Jenkins, 2004).

Consequently, FLEs likely develop coping strategies to manage their work stress related to bad news disclosure, as well as to optimize customer experiences when receiving bad news. Engaging in coping strategies tends to deplete FLEs' mental and emotional resources in the short term (Chan & Wan, 2012), but it also allows the FLEs to prepare (as much as possible) for the bad news disclosure, soften the blow for customers, and thus potentially improve their own well-being in the longer term (Côté, 2005; Grandey, 2003). However, service literature, and SFR research in particular, provides little insight into which coping strategies might be more effective for mitigating the negative implications of bad news disclosure for both FLEs and customers.

As the "face of the organization" to customers (Groth et al., 2019, p. 98), FLEs also are the main recipients of customers' negative reactions to unmet service expectations (Groth & Grandey, 2012). Bad news disclosure is a pivotal moment of truth, and the delivery method FLEs use likely influences how customers interpret and cope with the negative, threatening information (Bies, 2013). If they exhibit counterproductive emotional, cognitive, or behavioral responses (e.g., distress, dissatisfaction, rage), a spiral of negativity likely initiates. The self-perpetuating, damaging cycle of negative thoughts, feelings, and behaviors (Garland et al., 2010) can undermine key outcomes, such as customer satisfaction, brand reputation, and profitability. If instead the FLEs can manage the bad news disclosure in a sensitive, considerate manner, it might mitigate those negative responses and limit the damaging outcomes they can evoke, such as customer churn, negative word-of-mouth communication, legal action, or service sabotage.

Therefore, we propose that when FLEs must deliver bad news to customers, they need to be prepared for and optimize the moment to reduce their own work stress and the negative outcomes for customers. Noting the surprising lack of theoretical or empirical research into how FLEs should cope with bad news disclosure (whether prompted by a service failure or not), we raise three main research questions:

1. How does the disclosure of bad news by FLEs to customers unfold in service encounters?
2. How do FLEs cope with their stress and emotions when preparing for bad news disclosure?
3. Which strategies and tactics can FLEs use during bad news disclosure to mitigate the pain and inconvenience that customers experience?

By addressing bad news disclosure in service encounters from an FLE perspective, we include both situations that result from service failures and those in which the organization is not at fault. We review 192 disclosures of bad news, as recounted in 114 in-depth interviews with FLEs working in multiple service sectors and continents to answer the proposed research questions.

In turn, we make four contributions. First, we define bad news disclosure and classify the types of bad news FLEs disclose to customers during service interactions. Second, drawing on coping theory and analyses of our depth interviews, we develop an integrative framework of how FLEs disclose bad news to customers, which scholars and managers can apply in their efforts to enhance both customer and employee experiences in these emotionally charged touchpoints. Third, we present a protocol that FLEs can use to prepare for the bad news disclosure and thereby mitigate customer pain and inconvenience. Fourth, we propose an agenda for research, outlining ways in which scholars can continue to clarify how service organizations and FLEs should manage bad news disclosure during service encounters.

Understanding bad news disclosure in service encounters

Organizations can optimize customer experiences by managing touchpoints well (Bolton et al., 2022; De Keyser et al., 2020; Gao et al., 2023), including the (sometimes brief) interactions when FLEs must disclose negative information to customers. Even if they might be brief, such incidents are pervasive: A piano teacher must inform students that she is planning to retire; a computer technician must explain to customers that the data from their broken hard drive cannot be retrieved. In these scenarios, the bad news is difficult to both receive and disclose. Customers cannot obtain the service delivery they seek, and this unanticipated, negative information may evoke emotionally charged responses and distress (Delcourt et al., 2017). During such critical touchpoints, FLEs' ability to cope with work stress is especially pertinent, because the way they disclose bad news can shape customers' perceptions of their experience and of the service organization.

Defining bad news disclosure in service encounters

Before examining how FLEs cope with disclosing bad news to customers, we clarify exactly what constitutes bad news in service interactions. Bad news has not been defined explicitly in marketing or service disciplines, though its presence is implied in SFR research. Other disciplines, such as medicine, communication, management, and accounting, offer some fragmented conceptualizations of the construct (Web Appendix A). Studies of bad news frequently focus on specific, extreme situations (e.g., cancer diagnosis), without seeking a comprehensive definition that delineates its various components. To address this gap, we identify three common characteristics of bad news: It is unexpected, undesirable, and critical (Dubinsky et al., 2011; Sussman & Sproull, 1999). For service customers specifically, bad news refers to new, surprising, service-related information that is undesirable or unpleasant, as well as likely to affect their plans and resources. But bad news also can be defined according to its potential consequences, such as perceived loss of resources or feelings of distress (see Web Appendix A; Ptacek & Eberhardt, 1996; Rassin et al., 2006), which creates conceptual confusion. Therefore, we carefully leverage the three commonly identified characteristics of bad news to define *bad news disclosure during service interactions* as the revelation of unexpected, undesirable, and critical service-related information to customers. Such information can threaten customer resources and plans and thus elicit their distress and negative emotions.

Coping with disclosing bad news in service encounters

It might be reasonable to anticipate that SFR literature has addressed bad news disclosure, but most research in this domain prioritizes how organizations should deal with customers after service failures (for recent reviews, see Grégoire & Mattila, 2021; Liu et al., 2023). These studies investigate organizational options to "fix the customer" or resolve the situation (Van Vaerenbergh et al., 2019), strategies to compensate customers for inconvenience due to the service failure (Roschk & Gelbrich, 2014), customers' responses to organizational service recovery efforts (Valentini et al., 2020), and the impact of service failure attributions on customer outcomes (Van Vaerenbergh et al., 2014). But we find little consideration of how FLEs appraise or disclose bad news prior to the start of any recovery actions, which also constitutes a critical moment of truth.

For FLEs, disclosing bad news to customers can be daunting and stressful. It requires on-the-spot improvisation to address customers' emergent cognitive and emotional responses (Groth et al., 2019). Customers likely experience distress and frustration if the bad news prevents them from attaining their goals (Folkman & Moskowitz, 2004), and poor delivery of bad news could evoke additional confusion, stress, or resentment, all of which are detrimental to constructive encounters (Fallowfield & Jenkins, 2004). In contrast, if FLEs deliver bad news appropriately, customers may be more inclined to cope with the negative information productively and adjust to the emotionally charged moment of truth (Fallowfield & Jenkins, 2004).

When preparing to deliver bad news to customers, FLEs thus might engage in a self-regulatory coping process to manage their stress and negative emotions proactively (Bies, 2013). According to coping theory (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984), *coping* refers to the thoughts and behaviors that people use to manage the demands of situations that they appraise as stressful (Folkman & Moskowitz, 2004). Such situations are *stressors* and can comprise anything from a minor hassle to a major life event (Mason, 1975). When people perceive a personally significant situation as a threat to their goal attainment (Folkman & Moskowitz, 2004), they may initiate coping efforts to "prevent or diminish threat, harm, and loss, or to reduce the distress" caused by stressors (Carver, 2013, p. 496). The initial coping task often aims to reduce negative emotional responses to the stressor, followed by more instrumental forms of coping to manage the stressor and its outcomes (Folkman & Moskowitz, 2004).

To categorize the wide range of coping strategies that FLEs might adopt, we consider three main types of coping (Endler & Parker, 1994): problem-focused (e.g., elaborating an action plan), emotion-focused (e.g., regulating emotions), and avoidance-focused (e.g., distancing, denying). *Problem-focused coping* involves taking action to address the underlying problem or stressor. The FLE aims to identify and implement solutions, with the goal of reducing or eliminating the source of stress (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984). For example, FLEs might plan how to deliver bad news to customers or seek advice about optimal disclosure strategies from colleagues. *Emotion-focused coping* concentrates on reducing the emotional impact that the stressor triggers (Carver, 2013; Lazarus & Folkman, 1984; Stephenson & DeLongis, 2020), such that this strategy can involve seeking social support and reassurance or expressing a negative emotion (e.g., crying) before disclosing bad news. Finally, *avoidance-focused coping* refers to efforts to avoid or escape the stressor or the associated emotions. Bad news disclosers may be blamed even if they are not responsible for the situation (Rosen & Tesser, 1972), so to cope with the stress of delivering bad news, FLEs may resort to strategies such as procrastinating, distancing (i.e., minimizing contact with victims of harm), or refusing to elaborate (i.e., providing little explanation to victims) (Lavelle et al., 2016). Such avoidance-focused strategies can be harmful for the discloser, the recipient, and the organization.

Although these three types of coping strategies are distinct, they typically get implemented in complementary ways (Carver, 2013). Service research lacks insights into which strategies (or combinations) are more likely to be enacted. Applying Lazarus and Folkman's (1984) coping theory, we contend that FLEs use a series of coping strategies to prepare for and optimize the bad news disclosure, and these strategies move them through the process of disclosing bad news in a way that avoids excessive emotional depletion and work stress (Muraven & Baumeister, 2000), while also mitigating the negative impact of the bad news on the customer experience (Stephenson & DeLongis, 2020). By using the critical incident technique (CIT) to examine distinct applications of coping strategies by FLEs in their professional practice, we derive an integrative framework of how FLEs (prepare to) disclose bad news to customers. We also uncover coping strategies FLEs (could) implement when faced with this task. Thus, the framework can guide scholars and managers in their efforts to enhance customer and employee experiences in emotionally charged touchpoints.

Research design

Method

Considering the complexity of the focal phenomenon, we use the CIT (Flanagan, 1954; Gremler, 2004) to collect detailed descriptions of actual encounters during which FLEs disclosed bad news to customers. In line with CIT methodology, we gather data that reflect respondents' own perspectives; the FLEs determined which bad news disclosures (i.e., critical incidents) were most relevant to report (Gremler, 2004). Research assistants conducted audio-recorded face-to-face interviews in a location convenient to the respondent, after receiving training in the CIT method, based on our interview guide (Web Appendix B).

Sample and data collection

The research assistants identified FLEs using purposive sampling, such that they sought out FLE informants who were likely to disclose bad news in their work among their personal networks. In addition, the respondent selection process was designed to maximize variation in the sample, in terms of age, service industry, experience delivering bad news, and anticipated severity of regularly disclosed bad news. Research assistants then applied snowball sampling to expand the recruitment effort; they asked these respondents to identify other FLE informants from their personal networks, who might have rich experiences to share. The snowball sampling added approximately 20 respondents to the sample.

In total, the in-depth interviews involved 114 FLEs (mean interview time: 29 min) who disclose bad news to customers regularly (five times/week on average, with a range of 1–80 times). These FLEs (mean age: 37 years, ranging from 20 to 67 years; 48% women) work in various service sectors. Their average number of contact hours with customers is 23 h per week, ranging from 3 to 57 h. The interviews took place in Australia ($n=52$), Belgium ($n=26$), and the United States ($n=36$), which helps maximize sample variation and improve the generalizability of the findings. Participant recruitment ceased in each country with data saturation. Web Appendix C provides an overview of the respondents' profiles.

From these respondents, we collected 192 critical incidents, including both extreme (114) and typical (78) bad news disclosures.[1] More than half (58%) of the interactions pertain to an ongoing service relationship; the other 42% pertain to first-time service encounters. Among the 114 interviewed employees, only 8 (7%) received formal training or a protocol to follow when delivering bad news.

Data analysis

We analyzed the data in NVivo, using thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006) tailored for abductive research methods, as developed by Thompson (2022). With an abductive approach, we combine empirical data with theoretical insights from coping theory (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984), such that we leverage both emergent insights from the data (similar to inductive approaches and grounded theory development) (Dubois & Gadde, 2002) and existing theoretical explanations of coping (similar to deductive approaches). Abductive research is recursive, iterative (Thompson, 2022), and advantageous for fruitful cross-fertilization that can

[1] The U.S. respondents only reported extreme bad news, due to interview time constraints.

produce new theory; in our study, we integrate new concepts derived from the 192 critical incidents with established theoretical models (Dubois & Gadde, 2002). The resulting analysis emphasizes that researchers must begin with the deepest and broadest theoretical base possible, rather than excluding any preconceived theoretical ideas, and develop theoretical repertoires throughout the research process (Timmermans & Tavory, 2012). Accordingly, our abductive analysis comprises six steps (Thompson, 2022):

1. *Initial familiarization.* Two authors carefully read the interview transcripts, immersing themselves in the data and noting recurring themes or patterns, to gain a deep understanding of the content.
2. *Preliminary coding.* With an inductive approach, we conducted open coding of a subset of transcripts and thus identified and labeled segments of text that appeared significant, without being constrained by preexisting theories or categories. This process generated an initial set of codes (e.g., threatened customer resources, employee emotions, coping strategies, tactics for delivering bad news) grounded in the data.
3. *Developing a coding framework.* By reviewing these initial codes, we began to identify broader themes and patterns. In this stage, we introduced a deductive element, by comparing the emerging themes with existing literature and theoretical frameworks. To identify appropriate extant literature, we reviewed research pertaining to SFR (e.g., Van Vaerenbergh et al., 2014), FLE management (Grandey et al., 2004), customer and employee emotions and behaviors in service encounters (Du et al., 2011), and employee and customer coping strategies (Gelbrich, 2010; Strizhakova et al., 2012). We thus refined the coding framework to ensure it is both data-driven and theoretically informed.
4. *Abductive iteration.* We applied the refined coding framework to the entire data set, iterating between the data and existing theories (Strauss & Corbin, 1998) and remaining purposefully open to new insights from the data that might not fit neatly within existing theories, to allow for the emergence of novel themes. Any disagreements were resolved through discussion between the authors.
5. *Reliability and validity.* To enhance coding reliability, the researchers independently coded the transcripts. We used Cohen's (1960) Kappa coefficient to assess inter-rater reliability; it reached 0.90, which indicates high coder agreement. Any discrepancies were discussed and resolved, as is required for a robust and consistent coding process. To ensure validity, we also triangulated the data, by comparing the interview data with our multidisciplinary literature review, supplementary research streams, and secondary data[2] (Strauss & Corbin, 1998). These data also enabled us to compare our CIT data with the organizational practices suggested in the business press.
6. *Thematic analysis.* After finalizing the coding, we conducted a thematic analysis to explore the relationships among the identified themes. This step involved synthesizing the themes into an integrative framework (Fig. 1) that can explain how FLEs cope with bad news disclosure in service encounters.

These steps represent a rigorous and systematic approach to coding the transcripts and accordingly enable us to develop a rich, theory-informed understanding of the coping strategies employed by FLEs during bad news disclosures.

Integrative framework of bad news disclosure

Our analysis of the CIT data suggests that bad news disclosure typically involves a six-step process that spans three main phases: preparation, delivery, and transition (Fig. 1). First, during the preparation phase, FLEs first appraise information—currently unknown to the customer—as being potentially bad news. Second, FLEs likely experience negative emotions if they regard the bad news as difficult to disclose. Third, they implement coping strategies to deal with their own emotions prior to disclosure. Fourth, during the delivery phase, FLEs disclose the bad news to the customer. Fifth, during the transition phase, they likely need to address customer emotions. Sixth, if possible, they identify alternative solutions. After this process, FLEs may initiate a recovery process (if possible),[3] and customers might agree to an alternative service or choose to exit. These preparation, delivery, and transition (and subsequent action) phases in turn determine employee-, customer-, and organization-related outcomes.

[2] We gathered various examples of potential support, such as video tutorials for how to deliver bad news (Crawley, 2014), self-help books for professionals (Buckman, 2010), and tutorials on related topics (Gallo, 2017). We find notable similarities between the recommendations in these hands-on support examples and the tactics employed by our respondents when disclosing bad news, as we detail subsequently in Table 3 and Web Appendix D.

[3] The first six steps in Fig. 1, shaded in gray, are the focus of the present study. If a failure occurs that triggers bad news disclosure, the FLE might initiate a subsequent service recovery process. To maintain a clear focus on the insufficiently studied process of bad news disclosure, and noting the vast SFR literature available (Van Vaerenbergh and Orsingher, 2016), we purposefully avoid addressing the service recovery process herein.

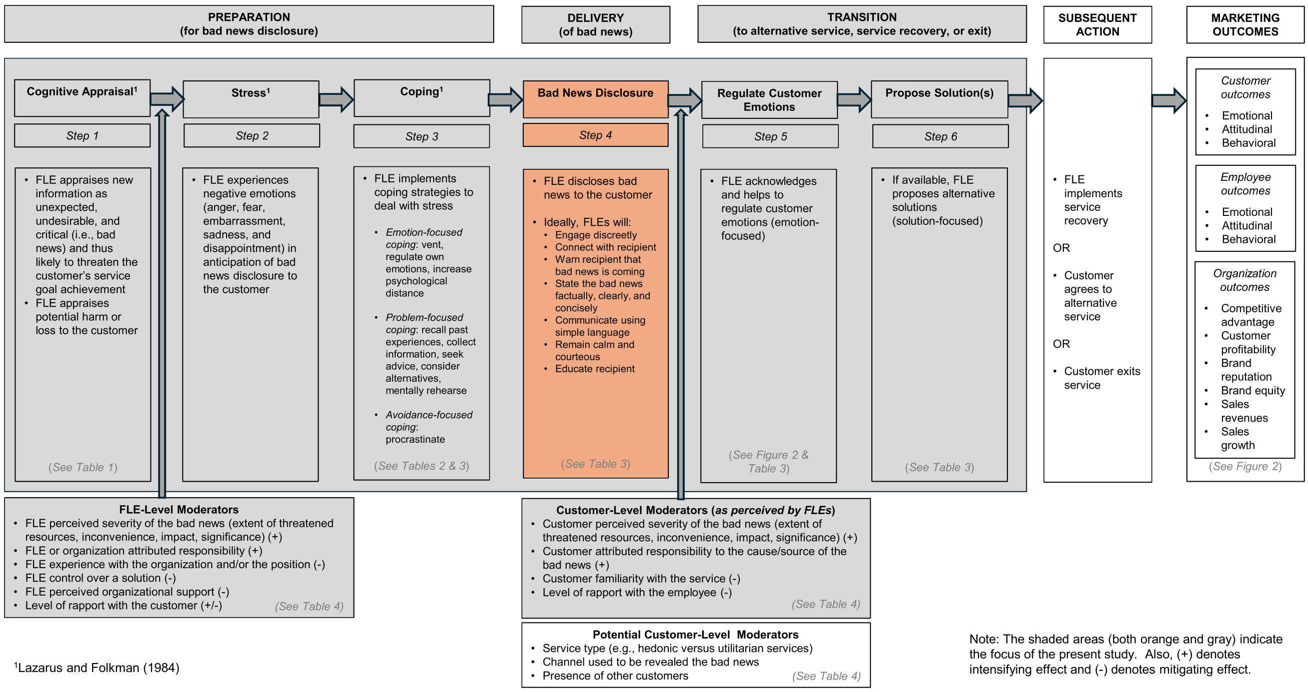

Fig. 1 Integrative framework of bad news disclosure

Step 1: FLE appraises new information as bad news for the customer

In line with coping theory (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984), the bad news disclosure process begins when FLEs become aware of critical service-related information, which is thus far unknown to and also likely to have detrimental consequences for the customer. The FLEs engage in cognitive appraisal to establish the relevance of the information and determine if it is likely to be considered bad news (Folkman & Moskowitz, 2004). Our informants, from various service contexts, describe bad news as information the customer "doesn't want to hear" and note that they often appraise this information as unexpected, negative, undesirable, unwanted, and critical to the customer's service goal achievement, thus creating a stressor (Folkman & Moskowitz, 2004). According to our data, bad news disclosure can include discoveries of:

1. Issues due to an organization-, product-, employee-, intermediary-, or customer-caused failure;
2. Organization-related decisions that are not failures, such as a new policy or decision (e.g., price increase, product obsolescence);
3. The organization's inability to provide the sought-after service, whether due to insufficient organizational skill, time, or resources; or
4. External events, caused by governing forces or fate, which are outside the control of the organization, such as a new law, power outage, terrorism or pandemic threat, criminal action, or natural disaster.

Reflecting these various sources, the bad news that FLEs must disclose varies considerably in severity, from unavailable sandwich ingredients or clothing sizes to a cybersecurity breach or death of a family member, as the following quote illustrates:

> *The worst news I've ever had to deliver to somebody [was to] a daughter…. We actually had to tell that daughter that her father had passed away [during his hike in the national park]. [visitor center employee, female, 40, Australian].*

When FLEs appraise the service-related information as unexpected, undesirable, and critical, they also gauge the significance of the news, based on its threat to customer resources. This assessment is part of the cognitive appraisal process, which aims to evaluate the potential for harm and loss that a stressor might create (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984). The CIT data, as summarized in Table 1, reveal some commonly mentioned customer resources that FLEs believe to be at risk due to the bad news disclosure, such as financial assets, time, psychological aspects, or social status. For example, when a bank manager had to decline a loyal customer's request for a home equity loan, due to the customer's low credit score, he anticipated the customer's desired service outcome would not be achieved (e.g., home renovation could not be financed without the loan) and also that the customer's psychological state might be negatively affected (e.g., a feeling of embarrassment when denied funding). Although several customer resources can be threatened simultaneously, even one threatened resource appears sufficient to evoke an appraisal by the FLE that the new information will be considered bad news by the customer.

Step 2: FLE experiences stress

If FLEs appraise the information as threatening to (one or more) customer resources and likely to be bad news, they often experience stress (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984), in the form of strong negative emotions as they consider how to manage the bad news disclosure. In our data, these negative emotions include fear, embarrassment, sadness, disappointment, and anger. Delivering bad news evokes unknown customer reactions, responses, and future developments, which can generate anxiety and stress among FLEs. The FLEs often anticipate that customers will react negatively

Table 1 FLEs' appraisals of customer resources threatened by bad news

Resource type	Illustrative quotes
Financial assets	They [*customers who let their car to be repaired*] thought that their car needed a few hundred dollars in repairs, ended up needing a few thousand dollars in repairs. [*automobile salesman, male, 44 years old, American*] We [*firefighters*] do building inspections. So quite often we're checking the buildings to make sure they're fire safe and quite often we've got to deliver the news to the owners or the tenants that they've got to update their fire safety systems, and that often means spending a fair bit of money to upgrade things. [*firefighter, male, 30, Australian*]
Time	They [*citizens who asked permission to develop a property that was declined by the city town planner*] may have invested considerable money and time into the work that they've progressed to that point, and they may not have an alternative strategy, or they may have invested in basically a development strategy that they're unlikely to get a return out of as a result of the bad news. [*town planner, male, 37, Australian*]
Functional aspects linked to product or service performance	We [*waiters of a coffee shop*] had our coffee machine break down … and obviously being a coffee shop that's our main seller. So, every customer that came through we were saying, "I'm sorry we can't serve coffee right now," and some people didn't take it that well. So, yeah, a lot of people couldn't have what they wanted to have. [*coffee shop waiter, female, 27, Australian*] [*The type of bad news we need to disclose is:*] We have broken or damaged part of your property, which is a quite common occurrence, just because when you're up in the tree and you drop a branch, you never know which way it's going to bounce or fall, if it's going to hit something on the way down and damage something, especially when you're working quite close to houses, sheds, and things. [*landscape specialist, male, 26, Australian*]
Psychological aspects	Having to tell someone that their hair is unable to be fixed when they have had something quite drastic done to it…For a female, having their hair looking good and feeling like themselves is an extremely important thing. It's important to their self-esteem, it's important for their confidence, and it's important to them to look right for their jobs and their family. [*hair stylist, female, 57, Australian*]
Effort and energy	When it comes to weight, people are extremely sensitive, and in this case, when someone makes the effort to lose weight and is told that the effort required is even greater than what they imagined … it requires even more courage and effort afterwards [*from those customers*], and so it's very, very difficult for them [*to receive such bad news*]. [*dietitian, female, 28, Belgian*]
Social status	The bad news to them [*VIP business travelers who are told that their preferred seat/hotel/hotel room is not available*] is that that's where they like to sit, that's the airline they like to travel on, that's where they get their frequent flyer points, this is the hotel they like, this is the room they normally get. It's something that they're accustomed to always getting, and "no" to them is a status thing. You can't let them lose their status, so you've got to find an alternative that's equal to their status, but they get something else on top of it. You have to try to give them something else on top so they don't lose [*the feeling*] that, "I'm a very important person and I expect these things." [*travel agent, female, 61, Australian*]
Physiological aspects	Very common instances of bad news would be someone coming in and saying, "I want to lose six kilos [*13 pounds*] in the next four weeks," and you say, "sorry that's not really something you can do." You have to give them more manageable expectations. [*personal trainer, male, 24, Australian*]
Scheduled experience	[*It was bad news*] just because she [*the customer*] would have already spent money booking tickets [*to accompany friends on a trip requiring a specific authorization from the authorities*]. She'd already got the time off work and all those kinds of things. So, she had her mind set that was what she was doing, her expectation was she was walking that walk. She'd already spent that money and now I was telling her, a voice at the end of the phone, that she couldn't do what she wanted to do [*with friends who had received the authorization*]. [*visitor center employee, female, 40, Australian*]

in their emotions (e.g., anger, sadness, disappointment), attitudes (e.g., dissatisfaction), and behaviors (e.g., switching, complaining). Some FLEs are afraid to cause emotional distress, discomfort, and/or harm to recipients, as the following quote illustrates:

> *I was so obviously nervous about calling him;* [I] *actually put it off for a couple of days…. He owed me some money and to these people $95 is a lot of money…. I knew that it would have been a lot of money for him because of the conversations we'd had previously.* [clinical exercise physiologist, female, 24, Australian]

FLEs indicate that the stress they experience can be intensified or mitigated by a range of moderating factors (see Fig. 1). The most frequently mentioned intensifying factor is the perceived severity of the bad news. Discovering bad news that they perceive would severely impact customers increases FLE stress. To illustrate, a real estate appraiser had to inform a client that his project was not going to be profitable and thus could not be financed:

> *It's bad* [news to deliver] *because I'm … the final hurdle to get the finance to build it. A developer has* [undertaken months of work and incurred significant expense] *and all he wants to do now is kick it off and then we're basically saying it can't be done… On top of that,* [the client] *still owed me money to do the work to give them bad news.* [real estate appraiser, male, 33, Australian]

Several FLEs also describe experiencing more stress when they perceive that they or their organization is responsible for the bad news—compared to bad news triggered by external events (e.g., governing forces or fate) or customers themselves. One example illustrates the stress an FLE faced when she found out that a pre-ordered product had been mistakenly sold to another customer:

> *We'd never lost…or sold on someone else's* [lay away]. *Being the person there that got to deal with* [informing the customer that her pre-ordered product has been sold by error to another customer]*, it was my first one that I just kind of got thrown in the deep end with…I have to fix this, this is my problem to fix, and it was stressful.* [retailer, female, 22, Australian]

However, FLEs indicate their stress is mitigated when they (1) have experience in customer-contact positions (and thus in delivering bad news), (2) believe they have some control over a solution to be implemented, and (3) perceive they have organizational support from their supervisors. For example, the following quote illustrates the high stress a relatively inexperienced FLE encountered:

> *It was quite difficult* [to deliver the news]. *I knew that I'd made a mistake. It was a new role for me so it was a lot more responsibility than I was normally used to and I was learning a new system…that I hadn't received any training on. So, I knew that I'd stuffed up…so having* [the customer] *that was much older than me be upset…I was a bit ruffled by the whole thing initially.* [teacher aide, male, 25, Australian]

Interestingly, we find the level of rapport the FLE has with the customer has mixed impacts on stress. For some FLEs, not having an existing personal connection with the customer (Gremler & Gwinner, 2000) can increase the levels of stress among FLEs before disclosing bad news, as the following quote illustrates:

> [It was difficult to announce the bad news] *because if I've not spoken to the parent before, it's first contact. Especially if first contact is bad, like "your child hasn't done well, not behaving in class" kind of thing, the anxiety level is up there.* [secondary teacher, male, 35, Australian]

In contrast, some FLEs tell of experiencing greater stress when they have cultivated a good rapport with the customer because they are afraid of the potential consequences of the bad news for the customer relationship, as the following quote illustrates:

> *The bad news is always difficult to communicate to someone you know…In some cases you have stronger approaches with some people than with others, so you get attached to some a little more, and then when you're attached to someone and you have to break the bad news, it's always harder.* [nursing assistant, female, 54, Belgian]

Step 3: FLE implements coping strategies before revealing bad news

To deal with stress they experience, FLEs employ various coping strategies, including cognitive and behavioral efforts to manage situations that tax or exceed employee resources (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984). The following quote illustrates the effort of one FLE to manage the disclosure of bad news:

> *I spent some time deliberating on how best to give the news. So basically, through just…putting myself in their position. How would I like to receive that news if I had to receive it?* [town planner, male, 37, Australian]

Coping strategies significantly determine individual adaptations to stressful events. In line with Endler and Parker's (1994) research, we find support for the three primary types of coping strategies: emotion-focused, problem-focused, and avoidance-focused. In Table 2, we summarize the strategies used by the FLEs in our sample, as revealed by the CIT data.

Emotion-focused coping In their efforts to regulate and manage the negative emotions associated with the stressful situation, FLEs note four tactics: venting emotions to others outside the organization (e.g., family, friends), venting emotions to colleagues, attempting to regulate their own emotions, and increasing their psychological distance from the situation and/or customer. In some cases, FLEs seek someone external to the organization to get an outside view of the situation or to avoid being judged by a colleague, but others seek an internal target for their venting—someone who understands the context, stress, and negative emotions experienced by the FLE. Colleagues can offer significant emotional support, due to their contextual knowledge of the stressor. Some FLEs work privately to regulate their own emotions by taking deep breaths. When FLEs work to create psychological distance from the negative event or the customer, they hope to reduce the perceived difficulty of the disclosure task (Thomas & Tsai, 2012). The following quote illustrates the emotion-focused strategies a school psychologist used to deal with her fear when preparing to tell the parents of an 11-year-old child that he had engaged in inappropriate behavior:

> *It was the first time I'd had to break this kind of* [extremely serious] *news. So, you never really know how to go about it, and anyway, if you had to do it again, it's never a comfortable situation, because you never know how* [the parents] *are going to react. Before meeting the parents, I experienced stress and apprehension about how the parents would react… It's clear that this is news I wouldn't like to receive. As a psychologist you have to be neutral and take things at a distance* [school psychologist, female, 30, Belgium]

Emotion-focused coping strategies are particularly useful when customers themselves, or external events, are responsible for the bad news because such events are frustrating for FLEs and emotionally effortful to disclose.

Problem-focused coping When taking action to address the stressor (i.e., forthcoming bad news disclosure), FLEs mention a variety of problem-focused coping strategies. Some recall similar bad news disclosures they encountered in the past, then apply lessons learned and key insights from those past negative experiences. Other FLEs put themselves in the customer's shoes to predict how the customer might respond, emotionally, attitudinally, and behaviorally. With these potential customer reactions in mind, FLEs often gather information to ensure a good understanding of the customer and his or her relationship with the organization. If they have sufficient time and resources available, FLEs may seek out trustworthy others (external or internal to the organization) whom they regard as competent and benevolent and who can provide information, insights, or advice. For example, FLEs might meet with their supervisor to request back-up or advice, seek "approval" of their bad news disclosure plan, or share the burden of disclosure. Using the information and insights they gather, FLEs also might consider alternatives to suggest to the customer, as well as develop a plan to reveal the bad news, such as laying out the key facts, arguments, and alternatives (if available) to discuss. To deliver the bad news fluently, FLEs might mentally rehearse their delivery. Finally, some FLEs report making sure to allocate sufficient time to deliver the news. The following quotes illustrate some of these problem-focused coping strategies:

> *I did everything I could to line up all my ducks in a row before I went in and told the bad news…I went in prepared, which is really important for me, and that does help with making me feel better pretty quickly. [marriage celebrant, female, 33, Australian]*

> *I try every time to be well-prepared and to know how to answer, to prevent customer questions, so I anticipate every time and I try to prepare for this bad news. [architect, female, 26, Belgium]*

These problem-focused coping strategies, particularly gathering information, seeking out trustworthy and/or knowledgeable others, and considering alternatives, are largely used when preparing to disclose bad news caused by organizations and their employees.

Avoidance-focused coping To avoid or escape from the stress of the situation, multiple FLEs describe procrastination in disclosing the bad news, even when they are fully informed about the issue and have alternative options to suggest. This tendency to withhold bad news might result from a fear of upsetting the customer or a desire to protect the customer from distressing or sad news, as the following quote indicates:

> *I have* [procrastinated] *a few times, because I've been too anxious to call up certain customers or clients because in the past they sort of knocked me around.* [dental surgery receptionist, female, 24, Australian]

Combined coping responses Other FLEs in our study implemented a combination of coping strategies (emotion and/or problem and/or avoidance coping), as in the following quote:

Table 2 FLE coping strategies before bad news disclosure

Coping strategies	Illustrative quotes
Emotion-focused	
Vent emotions with friends and relatives	I rang [*my husband*] Doug at work to talk it through before I rang [*the customer*] because I just knew I needed to talk it through with another person […] to calm me down. [*marriage celebrant, female, 33 years old, Australian*]
Vent emotions with colleagues	One of our residents died. That was a shock for me but also for my colleagues. I was the one who had to deliver the news to the other residents. Before [*delivering the bad news to the residents*], we met with my colleagues to share feelings and to see what to do next. [*educator, female, 54, Belgian*]
Regulate own emotions	I make sure that I'm calm before I deliver the news as well. [*private instrumental music teacher, female, 33, Australian*]
Increase psychological distance from the event or customer	You have to be neutral and take things at a distance … it's clear that this is news I wouldn't like to receive. [*psychologist, female, 30, Belgian,*]
Problem-focused	
Put self in customers' shoes while anticipating customer questions and reactions	I spent some time deliberating on how best to give the news. So basically through just thinking—putting myself in their position how would I like to receive that news if I had to receive it. [*town planner, male, 37, Australian,*]
Gather a maximum of information to be ready for the revelation and customer questions	[*Before delivering the news*], I'll review it [*customer file*] for 10 min, I'll think about what his questions will be or what his issues and his bitebacks will be, and I'll have my rebuttal and my answer for everything there. I generally am pretty prepared when I have those conversations, and because it was so in the front of my mind, I basically could rattle off all the detail of the report as well…I kind of knew it was going to be a difficult conversation. [*real estate employee, male, 33, Australian*]
Share the situation with colleagues and/or relatives to collect insights and advice	I discussed with my partner, who also works in a similar field, some scenarios or some ways that I could deal with that [*bad news delivery*]. I also spoke with another colleague of mine that's been mentoring me about that [*bad news delivery*], so I got some advice from her, as well [*higher education lecturer, male, 26, Australian*]
Request back-up from a colleague or supervisor	I would always call my manager. I…work Saturdays and I was always out the front on my own, so I'd always call my manager just to get some help. She would usually like, "Oh, don't worry about it; I'll deal with it on Monday," so that was always a relief to me to get it off my shoulders. [*dental surgery receptionist, female, 24, Australian*]
Consider an alternative solution to the problem	I have to assess each situation, before I talk to the customer, to come up with a solution so when I meet with the customer, it's easy to see the solution rather than focusing on the problem. [*sales consultant, male, 44, American*]
Prepare a plan to reveal the news	I had my checklist of points and reasoning behind it, each thing I was going to say, so it wasn't like he'd just called me up and got me on the spot and said, "Why not?" I was prepared for the conversation. [*customer liaison in healthcare, female, 28, Australian*]
Mentally rehearse the plan to reveal the news	Obviously, you've got to collect your thoughts, and I like to run through it in my head once or twice before I have the conversation. [*customer service in retail, female, 22, Australian*]
Be fast in preparing the delivery of the bad news	I knew I had to [*deliver the news*] straightaway, sort it out and get it fixed. So, it was almost like an instant reaction to it. I didn't put too much thought into it. It was just like: this is what I've done. I'm going to have to own up to it, just bite the bullet and face it head on. [*landscaper, male, 26, Australian*]
Avoidance-focused	
Procrastinating the disclosure of bad news	I was quite hesitant to call the customer. Obviously once the customer had come face-to-face, I couldn't really avoid it. [*brand manager, male, 23, Australian*]

> *There's always going to be a little bit of anxiety, but I think generally just trying to be prepared* [problem-focused]*, talking to your manager* [problem-focused] *to try and get the best idea of how to deal with the situation* [emotion- and problem-focused], *and also just dealing with it ASAP* [problem-focused], *because if you put it off* [avoidance-focused], *it just gets worse, not only for them* [customers] *but also for yourself. You just get more anxious about it. So, just deal with it ASAP; rip the Band-Aid off; just do it; get it over and done with.* [dental surgery receptionist, female, 24, Australian]

This quote also illustrates that some coping strategies can be beneficial for both the customer and the FLE (e.g., quickly preparing to deliver the news), whereas others might be detrimental for both parties (e.g., putting off bad news disclosure).

Step 4: FLE discloses bad news to the customer

Following the preparation phase, delivery occurs, during which FLEs disclose the information they consider to be bad news for the customer. To mitigate the resulting pain or inconvenience, FLEs use several strategies, applied at different points of the disclosure process: right before, during, and after they disclose. (Web Appendix D contains an overview of these tactics, together with illustrative quotes.)

Right before disclosure When FLEs first meet customers to disclose bad news, they sometimes actively attempt to "get the setting right," by making sure the service environment is adequate, such as to ensure discretion. The service environment is particularly pertinent when disclosing severe bad news, such as when emergency service professionals must share information about an accident or medical professionals deliver health diagnoses:

> *Sometimes when it's, say, an elderly person ... I will ask them, "Do you mind if I come inside?" We'll go inside and I'll get them to sit down* [before delivering the bad news]. [police officer, male, 32, Australian]

To soften the blow, some FLEs warn customers that bad news is coming, so that they can adjust their expectations of the service delivery. For example, an oncology nurse practitioner (female, 59, American) starts her disclosure of (negative) disease diagnoses by saying, "I'm afraid we've got some things that concern us on this scan." A police officer (male, 32, Australian) similarly leads into the delivery of death notifications by cautioning, "I've got some bad news to tell you."

During disclosure The FLEs describe using diverse combinations of strategies related to verbal communication, nonverbal communications, and emotion management to display or hide certain emotions. For example, they choose their words carefully to reduce the complexity of the message (e.g., "[I aim to] be clear and concise and deliberate," [town planner, male, 37, Australian]), use humor to help regulate the emotional experience (e.g., "I say [it] with a smile and with a bit of a joke," [hair dresser, female, 30, Australian]), speak slowly and quietly (e.g., "speak slowly, softly, directly, and accurately," [oncology nurse practitioner, male, 52, Australian]), and engage in deep acting to display appropriate emotions (e.g., "keep calm; let them say what they need to say; let them calm down," [travel advisor, female, 61, Australian]). Among nonverbal techniques, FLEs report engaging in a range of communication tactics, such as making reassuring eye contact or physically comforting the customer:

> *I always sit down so I'm not towering over people, and a lot of times, I'll just put my hand on their arm, if it's appropriate, or just put my hand on their shoulder, if I'm sitting near enough to them. Just so there is some contact, or just the feeling that… we're connected a little bit, or that I care that I'm giving them bad news.* [oncology nurse practitioner, female, 59, American]

Notably, though many FLEs indicate a preference for being straightforward, others actively attempt to sugarcoat bad news to soften the blow.

Step 5: FLE regulates customer emotions

Immediately following the bad news disclosure, the transition phase commences. In this phase, FLEs may need to address customers' emotions, which can be intense. FLEs suggest they attempt to act empathetically and display compassion, and they describe several tactics for managing the impact of the disclosure on customers: they invite customers to vent their distress and negative emotions, acknowledge customers' emotions, explain that their emotions are fair and legitimate, and help customers cognitively reappraise the situation to reduce their distress and negative emotions (Web Appendix D). The following quote illustrates an attempt by a police officer to soften the blow for a citizen who learned that his mother passed away.

> *Once he collapsed obviously…I went* [and] *sat on the ground beside him and…just let him cry. Just let him know, you know, I'm here. Like not saying "I'm here for you," but saying "anything we can do, let me know.*

> *I can call your boss. I can do whatever you want me to do…I can call a family member for you." There's not much you can do to somebody once you've delivered that news* [that their mother has passed away] *to make them feel better. So, you've just got to try to assist them in any way possible.* [police officer, male, 32, Australian]

After receiving bad news, some customers experience strong negative emotions while other customers react less negatively, suggesting the degree to which FLEs may need to regulate customer emotions may be intensified or mitigated by a variety of moderating factors (see Fig. 1). As with FLEs, the most prevalent intensifying factor is the severity of the bad news for the customer. FLEs report that regulating customer emotions (Step 5) following bad news disclosure (Step 4) is more challenging when customers perceive the bad news is extremely severe, such as a poor academic performance (e.g., a student fails an exam, negatively affecting their academic progress) or the abrupt stop of an ongoing project (e.g., city administrators refusing to approve a building permit for land a customer has already purchased). FLEs report that, depending on the type of resource threatened, customers may experience a diversity of emotions which can vary in intensity: news jeopardizing plans for which no acceptable alternative is possible is likely to provoke intense powerlessness while news threatening customer convenience tends to prompt a less intense response (e.g., disappointment).

Similarly, a number of FLEs note that they undertake more emotional regulation with customers who attribute the bad news to their own failure and thus feel highly responsible, guilty, or ashamed about the issue. Our analysis of the data uncovered several such examples, including a dietitian informing a customer that she had not lost weight since the last appointment, a bank officer telling a customer her poor credit has resulted in a declined loan application, and a school teacher announcing to parents that their son has learning difficulties. In situations in which customers may attribute the source of the issue to their own inability or failure to meet the guidelines provided by the service provider, FLEs tend to take time to adequately regulate customer emotions before transitioning to solutions (Step 6). Conversely, when FLEs think they or their organization is responsible for the bad news (resulting in negative and highly aroused customer emotions such as anger), they tend to be highly concerned about the intensity of negative customer emotions that can trigger destructive customer behaviors (e.g., aggressive verbal outbursts). In this delicate context, FLEs try to transition as fast as possible to the next step—focusing on potential solutions (Step 6)—to placate the customer.

Finally, FLEs report that they undertake less emotional regulation with customers who are familiar with the service. From the FLE's perspective, customers who have good rapport with the FLE and who have prior knowledge of the service may feel they have more control over the situation; those customers appear to transition more smoothly through this emotional step.

Step 6: FLE focuses on solution(s)

The final step in the transition phase occurs once customer emotions have been somewhat appeased. At that point, FLEs may suggest alternatives, though in some cases, no alternative exists, such as when an 80-year-old maple tree had to be cut down to remove the threat of it falling on the customer's house. Yet even if customers perceive the situation as bleak, FLEs indicate that framing techniques can offer customers at least some sense of optimism. By leveraging positive versus negative framing, FLEs might present the situation as an opportunity versus a threat; for example, the FLE might suggest transforming the dying tree into a wooden sculpture or propose planting a new tree. Offering only a negative frame that highlights the threat of the situation (i.e., the dying tree may fall on the customer's house, and nothing else can be done), without mentioning the potential benefits of a solution, is likely to escalate customers' negative emotions, such as disappointment and frustration.

The following quote—reported by a professor who had to inform a top-tier student that she failed her examination—illustrates well the regulation of customer emotions (Step 5) followed by potential solutions (Step 6):

> *Well, I guess I tried to be very emotionally supportive. I also tried to explain the circumstances of what potentially led to that result. I also tried to give her enough information that she could follow it up, so that she could pursue a resolution that led to…a satisfactory end to that issue for her, as well. I also made sure that she realized that, at any point, I would always be there to support her* […]. [professor, male, 26, Australian]

In conclusion, we determine that FLEs generally proceed through six steps in the bad news disclosure process. After having appraised the information as bad news for the customer (Step 1), FLEs experience negative emotions and stress (Step 2). To deal with those emotions, they implement coping strategies (Step 3) that enable them to deliver the bad news (Step 4). After the bad news has been disclosed, FLEs address customer emotions to soften the blow (Step 5). If possible, FLEs offer a solution or plan to help customers deal with the bad news (Step 6).

Protocol for managing bad news disclosure

As noted, bad news disclosure represents a demanding task that must be managed sensitively to mitigate customer distress and inconvenience (Baile et al., 2002; Bies, 2013). When asked to appraise the quality of their bad news disclosure practices, FLEs mention several coping strategies and disclosure tactics that they use to manage their own stress while softening the blow for customers. They report using emotion-focused coping strategies to regulate their own emotional state, then engaging in problem-focused coping strategies to find the best way to disclose the bad news, such that they feel more prepared. This approach aligns with the tenets of coping theory (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984), which suggest that complementary strategies help people cope with stressors. During the bad news disclosure itself (Step 4), FLEs also cite specific tactics, such as discretion and warning the recipient of impending bad news, to smooth the delivery process, help customers regulate their emotional state, and encourage confidence in the service organization. Table 3 summarizes these reflections to propose a protocol to assist FLEs in their bad news disclosure efforts. This protocol can be implemented in a wide range of service contexts and for various types of bad news, providing generically applicable advice for FLEs across service industries.

Potential outcomes of bad news disclosure

Whereas some FLEs skillfully use coping strategies and disclosure tactics to soften the blow of bad news for customers, other FLEs struggle to execute bad news disclosure. In this sense, bad news disclosure could have beneficial outcomes for FLEs, customers, and organizations in certain settings, whereas in others, the consequences might be detrimental. Building on Groth and Grandey's (2012) conceptual framework of a dual-perspective negative exchange spiral in customer–employee service interactions, we expect that when bad news is disclosed to a customer, it could initiate a spiral of negativity (or positivity), during which customer and employee reactions influence each other. In Fig. 2, we depict the emotional, attitudinal, and behavioral responses possible from both customers and FLEs, as well as organizational-level outcomes, following bad news disclosure.

Potential customer outcomes When bad news disclosure is poorly executed, a "spiral of negativity" may start—that is, a self-perpetuating and damaging cycle of negative thoughts, feelings, and behaviors (Garland et al., 2010). Such a phenomenon is problematic: "once a negative spiral has started, it may be difficult to stop and can go from bad to worse in the short span of a single service exchange, but with far-reaching consequences" (Groth & Grandey, 2012, p. 4). When customers receive bad news, they may experience such negative emotions as sadness, disappointment, frustration, anger, distress, or powerlessness; they have little control over the situation. Such negative emotions can evoke various negative attitudes, including attributions of blame (Choi & Mattila, 2008), perceived unfairness (Goodwin & Ross, 1992), indifference toward the FLE who has delivered the bad news, defeatism, distrust, or dissatisfaction. These negative attitudes then can lead to counterproductive customer behaviors, such as an unwillingness to reappraise the situation, sabotage, negative word-of-mouth communication, or exit (Grégoire & Fisher, 2008; Harris & Reynolds, 2003; Keeling et al., 2021).

Managing the bad news disclosure well might prevent a spiral of negativity, because if customers regard the bad news disclosure as well-executed, they likely experience more positive emotions, such as hope, acceptance, serenity, and optimism (Plutchik, 1980). Indeed, according to

Table 3 Bad news disclosure protocol

Preparation Before bad news disclosure	Delivery Bad news disclosure	Transition Right after bad news disclosure
Emotion-focused coping strategies • Seek social support to regulate emotional state • Ensure sufficient psychological distance from the situation Problem-focused coping strategies • Reflect on past experience disclosing bad news • Consider any previous training about disclosing bad news • Collect available information about the situation • Identify potential courses of action for the customer to pursue • Develop a plan to disclose the bad news • Mentally rehearse the bad news disclosure	Delivery tactics • Engage discreetly (e.g., remove the recipient of bad news from other customers, lower voice to prevent being overheard) • Connect with recipient (e.g., make eye contact) • Warn the recipient that bad news is coming (e.g., "I'm afraid I have some bad news") • State the bad news factually, clearly, and concisely • Communicate using simple language • Remain calm and courteous • Educate the recipient by answering their questions, providing additional details requested, seeking technical support, or highlighting policies and procedures if needed	Transition tactics • Acknowledge customer emotions empathetically • If possible, suggest an alternative service provision or other options • If required, begin service recovery • If nothing can be done, close the service encounter by summarizing the situation • Request customer agreement to end the interaction

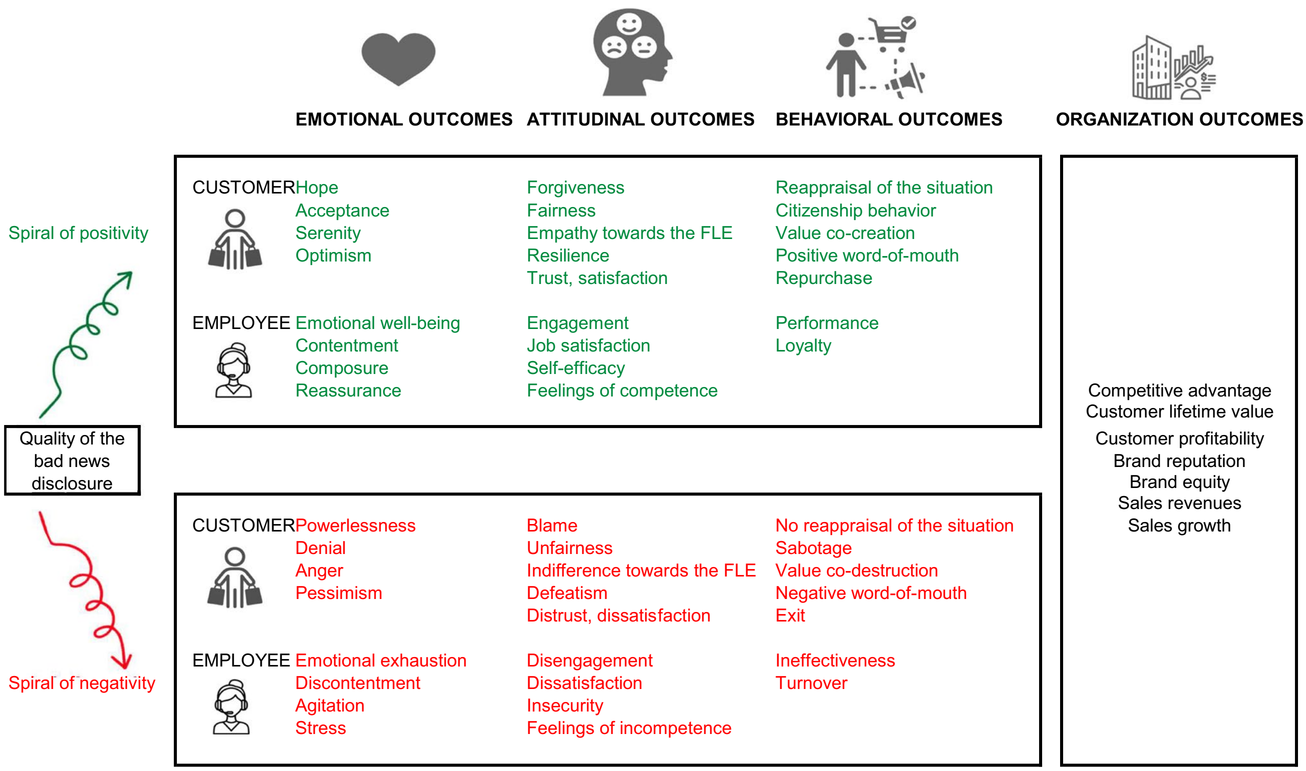

Fig. 2 Customer-, employee-, and organization-related outcomes of bad news disclosure

affect-as-information theory (Schwarz & Clore, 1988), affective feelings represent a source of information that can influence people's judgments and thought processing. When they experience a positive affective state, customers should be more likely to develop positive evaluations about the bad news disclosure and higher ratings of general well-being than if they were to enter a negative affective state (Schwarz & Clore, 1983). Effective bad news disclosure even might prompt customers to develop favorable attitudes, such as forgiveness (Kim et al., 2023; Wei et al., 2020) and empathy toward the FLE (Ngo et al., 2020; Wieseke et al., 2012), perceptions of fairness (Mattila & Cranage, 2005), trust, or satisfaction with the encounter (Delcourt et al., 2017; Sengupta et al., 2015). As predicted in SFR literature (e.g., Liao, 2007), such positive customer attitudes should lead to more favorable outcomes, such as customer loyalty, positive word-of-mouth communication, and increased repurchase intentions, as well as cognitive reappraisals to reframe the negative situation as more acceptable.

Potential FLE outcomes If their bad news disclosures do not transpire smoothly, FLEs may experience stress (Chan & Wan, 2012), a range of negative emotions (Fallowfield & Jenkins, 2004), rumination (Nolen-Hoeksema et al., 2008), and emotional exhaustion in the long run (Grandey et al., 2004; Van Jaarsveld et al., 2021). Poor customer–employee interactions negatively influence both customer satisfaction and employee well-being (Groth & Grandey, 2012), as illustrated in the following quote, describing a spiral of negativity that resulted after a dental surgery receptionist informed a customer he had to pay for the service, because insurance would not cover the fees:

> *He* [the customer] *became more enraged. Yeah, he was really adamant in his position, which is fair enough. I understand. I get it, but we're also coming from another position so yeah, he just got more and more enraged and just would not see it from my perspective. Which I found really difficult, because I was seeing it from his perspective, but I just don't think he was seeing it from ours. It was stressful though…he was getting more and more frustrated and angry, so that was making me anxious. Yeah, it was just a bit of an awkward situation.* [receptionist, female, 24, Australian]

If FLEs perform the bad news disclosure well though, a positive spiral may initiate (Garland et al., 2010; see Fig. 2). As the broaden-and-build theory of positive emotions suggests (Fredrickson, 1998), experiencing positive affect broadens awareness and encourages novel, exploratory thoughts and actions. In aversive situations like bad news disclosure, FLEs need a positive affective state to be able to think and act creatively. Furthermore, if FLEs believe the bad news disclosure was managed well and the customer reacts well, the FLEs are more likely to experience relief, emotional well-being (Mansour, 2023), and positive emotions such as contentment, composure, or reassurance (Shulga et al., 2024). As Fig. 2 indicates, those positive emotions can lead to employee engagement (Chen & Peng, 2021), job satisfaction, and self-efficacy, which implies improved FLE performance and loyalty (Carter et al., 2018). That is, and as the following quote illustrates, even bad news disclosures can lead to positive, benevolent, and constructive service exchanges:

> *Well, the very bad news was falling pregnant when I had at least 30 couples booked* [to celebrate their wedding] *and had to break the news that I was pregnant and that I might not be able to do some of those 30 couples' weddings. Yeah, breaking that news to brides who have become completely obsessed about their wedding and think that you're that person and you will do everything for them right through to the end.... But in the end, I managed to set them up with someone else....there's a slight relief once I know they've taken the news and they've got that information because for me the hardest part is getting that—starting that process of delivering that really bad news.* [marriage celebrant, female, 33, Australian]

Potential organization outcomes Building on our previous arguments and prior literature in various domains—including customer–employee interactions (Van Jaarsveld et al., 2021), the service–profit chain (Hogreve et al., 2017), value cocreation and codestruction (Keeling et al., 2021), and service recovery (Liu et al., 2023; Van Vaerenbergh & Orsingher, 2016)—we expect beneficial (detrimental) organization outcomes when the bad news disclosure is managed well (poorly). The beneficial outcomes for the service organizations likely include competitive advantages, financial outcomes (e.g., greater revenues, increased customer profitability), enhanced organization reputation, and greater brand equity (Katsikeas et al., 2016).

Discussion

Even though FLEs often confront the need to disclose bad news to customers, little is known about how they can best cope with this delicate, complex, critical task. To address this gap, the current research aims to make four key contributions. First, we offer a comprehensive definition of bad news disclosure in the context of service encounters, providing an overview of the various types of bad news that might be disclosed by FLEs to customers, which establishes conceptual clarity while also illustrating the ubiquitous nature of bad news disclosure. Second, we draw on coping theory (Folkman & Moskowitz, 2004; Lazarus & Folkman, 1984) to propose an integrative framework of how bad news disclosure by FLEs to customers unfolds in service encounters, which underlies our discussion of the impact of (well or poorly executed) bad news disclosure on marketing outcomes for customers, FLEs, and organizations. Third, we provide a protocol for bad news disclosure in service settings, detailing various strategies and tactics FLEs (can) use when disclosing bad news to optimize marketing outcomes. These insights establish notable implications for both scholars and practitioners who seek to improve service performance. Fourth, we offer an agenda for further research, to help advance understanding of bad news disclosure, as a critical moment in service interactions.

Implications for theory

To understand bad news disclosure in service encounters, we review research from management, organizational behavior, social psychology, medicine, and communication literature, which we leverage to establish a comprehensive definition. Specifically, *bad news disclosure during service interactions* is defined as the process of revealing unexpected, undesirable, and critical service-related information to customers. The conceptual clarity established by this definition can guide continued theoretical development and empirical investigations of this critical phenomenon.

Then, incorporating coping theory (Folkman & Moskowitz, 2004; Lazarus & Folkman, 1984), we also propose a detailed integrative framework (Fig. 1) that illustrates how FLEs' disclosure of bad news to customers typically unfolds. This process has been a "black box" thus far: known to occur but not explicitly described in marketing or service literature. Our integrative framework captures the nuances of this complex feature of service delivery and its potential marketing outcomes by identifying six key steps and several potential moderators. In particular, we establish coping theory as a useful theoretical lens for examining bad news disclosure, and the empirical evidence establishes that disclosing bad news is a prevalent, unavoidable, emotionally charged, and demanding task that generates high levels of stress among FLEs (Baile et al., 2002; Bies, 2013). Negative emotions and stress can be mitigated though, if FLEs deploy problem-focused and emotion-focused coping strategies. Because it features coping theory as a theoretical foundation, the integrative framework clarifies how and why emotion- and problem-focused coping can facilitate better bad news disclosure, which then can strengthen customer satisfaction, brand reputation, and profitability, as well as improve FLE well-being.

We also contribute to SFR literature, moving beyond a conventional focus on the service recovery process that starts after a service failure, to address the period prior to the start of the actual recovery (Van Vaerenbergh et al., 2019). Extant SFR literature tends to neglect critical processes that may need to transpire between the time FLEs become aware of the failure (assuming it is not yet known by the customer) and before service recovery begins—specifically, the disclosure of a service failure not yet known to the customer (Fig. 1). Including this customer touchpoint in the broader SFR process contributes to a more comprehensive understanding of service recovery when things have gone wrong.

Implications for practice

Understanding how FLEs and organizations can better serve customers, even during bad news disclosure, has great strategic importance. For organizations that assign FLEs to engage in bad news disclosure to customers, we propose three valuable insights, derived from our findings, that should help managers enable FLEs to manage the bad news disclosures effectively and thus improve customers' experiences.

First, a wide variety of information can represent bad news to customers. Managers and FLEs likely realize that organizational failures necessitate bad news disclosures, but diverse other factors—customer failures, new legal requirements, natural disasters—also can trigger customer perceptions of bad news and threats to their desired service outcome. By considering the different types of bad news we identify herein, managers and FLEs might become more sensitive to such situations and better prepared for the resulting bad news disclosure. We also detail which customer resources might be adversely affected by bad news (Table 1). With this overview of customers' resources (e.g., time, financial assets, social status) and related threats, managers and FLEs can better anticipate which kinds of information represent bad news and what resources they will need to help customers retain, protect, or expand (Hobfoll, 1989).

Second, managers can use our integrative framework in Fig. 1 to predict how bad news disclosure will unfold and the likely flows of thoughts, emotions, and behaviors that FLEs will experience in these stressful situations. Managers can also use our framework to focus FLEs' attention on the importance of softening the blow when breaking bad news and highlight the impact of bad news disclosure can have on various marketing outcomes at the customer-, FLE-, and organization-levels. In particular, because specific coping strategies (Step 3 of Fig. 1) can facilitate or impede both mental and physical health (Endler & Parker, 1994), managers could identify and discuss strategies with their FLEs that enable them to preserve their own well-being and manage the stress associated with bad news disclosure (Table 2).

Third, our findings suggest bad news disclosure can be conducted strategically to minimize its negative impacts. Our insights are incorporated into an actionable protocol of bad news disclosure (Table 3) that provides FLEs, across service settings, with a practical guide for bad news disclosure. Managers can rely on our protocol to suggest tactics their FLEs might use to soften the blow of bad news disclosure on customers. With the protocol as a starting point, managers can develop a training program to improve coping strategies (preparation phase), disclosure tactics (delivery phase), and transition tactics (transition phase) to enhance FLEs' and customers' experiences when bad news is revealed. In the following paragraphs we provide some examples of training and tools that could enhance bad news disclosure for each phase.

Training for the preparation phase Our protocol suggests FLEs implement emotion-focused coping strategies—such as ensuring sufficient psychological distance from the emotionally charged situation—as they prepare to disclose bad news to customers. Organizations could introduce FLEs to meditation exercises to enhance their mindfulness at the workplace—as mindfulness can help them handle their stress and reduce the detrimental effect of difficult customers on work engagement (Jang et al., 2020). Further, our protocol also suggests FLEs could implement problem-focused coping strategies such as collecting information about the situation. To foster the sharing of knowledge and resources for coping with bad news disclosure among FLEs, managers should encourage FLEs to support each other and work collaboratively to learn from each other by gathering relevant information and advice for such disclosures. Communal spaces allowing FLEs to informally interact with colleagues could be created to facilitate such sharing and support. Although work environments have dramatically changed due to the pandemic (Good et al., 2023), management should still try to instill a sense of social connection on the job to foster social exchanges between FLEs to better equip them for bad news disclosure.

Training for the delivery phase One tactic our protocol recommends is for FLEs to maintain eye contact with the customer when disclosing bad news. However, it may be difficult for FLEs to self-monitor and evaluate their nonverbal behavior in real-time situations. Therefore, to be better equipped for bad news disclosure, organizations might have their FLEs employ immersive virtual reality technology (e.g., virtual reality headset) with virtual customers to simulate interactions where bad news is disclosed. Such technology can replicate the features of a real situation, including its psychological processes (Schmid Mast et al., 2018), to immerse FLEs in simulated bad news encounters. Immersive role plays can allow FLEs to practice maintaining eye contact with the virtual customer while delivering bad news. Current technology can detect if an FLE loses eye contact with a virtual customer, and a headset with an integrated eye-tracker can immediately remind the FLE to resume eye contact (Adhanom et al., 2023). Accordingly, such immersive technology can help FLEs to become aware of their nonverbal behavior and more comfortable and proficient in real-life situations.

In the same vein, virtual reality headsets could be also used to monitor FLEs' para-verbal (e.g., tone and pace of voice) and verbal signals (e.g., use of vocabulary) to warn FLEs when they are speaking too fast or when they are using jargon or language that is too complex when interacting with a virtual customer. For instance, immersive technology could be used to train an insurance company FLE to disclose bad news to a virtual customer with low literacy and limited financial means in a manner which is easily comprehended.

Training for the transition phase Our protocol suggests FLEs should acknowledge customer emotions empathetically. Therefore, managers should encourage and train FLEs to imagine themselves in the customer's situation to enhance empathetic understanding during bad news encounters. FLEs might not be fully aware that, for a given customer, news that a FLE considers to be trivial (e.g., out-of-stock products or a price increase) can be potentially devastating. For FLEs who must frequently disclose bad news, it is important to highlight that a customer may react in different ways to the news based upon its perceived severity. Thus, training FLEs to empathize with their customers is imperative when disclosing information perceived as severe.

A systematic review of the impact of empathy training on FLEs reveals a significant increase in empathy scores following exercises such as perspective-taking and active listening (Lajante et al., 2023). Such training could enhance the empathy of FLEs in bad news encounters. Further, FLEs need to detect and understand the emotions displayed by customers before being able to acknowledge customer emotions empathetically. FLEs can now be assisted by artificial intelligence in detecting subtle customer emotions and suggesting how to appropriately respond to them. Such emerging technology is available, for instance, to assist call-center agents when interacting with customers: a guidance platform can use speech recognition to analyze ongoing call-center conversations to provide agents with instantaneous recommendations based on the (emotional) flow of the interaction (Feng & Devillers, 2023; Płaza et al., 2022).

Research agenda

Our examination of bad news disclosure suggests that the process includes three phases (preparation, delivery, and transition), which provides the organization for our proposed research agenda (Table 4). In addition to research designed to clarify the preparatory, delivery, and transition phases, we propose continued efforts to examine the impacts of bad news disclosure on various employee-, customer-, and organization-related outcomes (Fig. 2).

Preparation phase of bad news disclosure

Continued research on bad news disclosure should clarify further how FLEs can prepare effectively. A limitation associated with the CIT is its reliance on respondents' memories of their previous practices. Although we identify multiple tactics that FLEs employ when they prepare themselves to disclose bad news, additional steps could exist that they forgot or failed to report. Future research thus might explore the steps FLEs should take to prepare for a specific bad news disclosure or what they can do when they lack any reasonable opportunity to prepare. The proposed three-phase protocol (i.e., preparation, delivery, and transition phases) can be tested and further refined to aid FLEs in this task. The research questions in Table 4 refer to various steps in preparing for bad news disclosure, including appraising information, experiencing stress and negative emotions, and identifying appropriate coping strategies. For example, we call for research that investigates *how* FLEs assess the potential impact of bad news (Step 1 in Fig. 1), anticipates the emotions they may experience when disclosing bad news (Step 2), and identifies the preemptive coping approaches they consider prior to bad news disclosures, as well as the potential drivers of their efficient coping strategies (Step 3).

Delivery phase of bad news disclosure

The delivery phase (Step 4) also demands careful scrutiny; considerable work remains to be done to understand this phase of the bad news disclosure process. In terms of FLE training, we hope further research will examine how to best equip FLEs to disclose bad news and what types of training (e.g., roleplay, simulation exercises, situation-specific protocols) enables them to mitigate customers' (negative) reactions effectively. Scholars also could investigate the role of organizational support in enabling FLEs to disclose bad news to customers. Deeper investigations of communication

Table 4 Research agenda

Topic	Illustrative research questions
Preparation phase FLE information appraisal (*Step 1*)	Assessment of potential impact of bad news • Which types of bad news are considered most difficult for FLEs to disclose or do they feel poorly equipped to disclose? • To what extent are managers aware of how difficult it is for FLEs to disclose bad news? • When (or in what conditions) are FLEs most likely to engage in preparation prior to disclosing bad news? • What impact does the FLE's lack of preparation (i.e., not fully understanding the bad news) have on bad news disclosure? • How do FLEs perceive the importance of preparation prior to bad news disclosure to customers? • Can organizational communication policies and guidelines influence FLEs' bad news disclosure preparation process?
Preparation phase FLE experiences stress (*Step 2*)	Anticipating FLE emotions • Which emotions are associated with what types of bad news? • How does the perceived severity of the bad news affect FLE emotions? • How can organizations and managers decrease fear-related emotions experienced by FLEs when preparing for bad news disclosure to customers? • How does the emotional intelligence of FLEs affect their experience of stress and negative emotions?
Preparation phase FLE implements coping strategies (*Step 3*)	Preemptive coping approaches • When should each coping strategy (emotion-focused, problem-focused, and avoidance-focused) be used? • In which conditions is each coping strategy most effective? • What can organizations do to increase the likelihood that FLEs adopt adaptive coping strategies? • To what extent do FLEs collaborate with colleagues or seek support from supervisors during the preparation phase, and when can these efforts alleviate FLEs' stress? • Which factors increase the likelihood that FLEs seek support from colleagues to cope with their stress and negative emotions when preparing for bad news disclosure? • When (or in what conditions) are FLEs more likely to engage in (mal)adaptive coping strategies when disclosing bad news? • How do FLEs manage their own emotional well-being and cope with stress when regularly faced with the responsibility for bad news disclosure to customers? • What differentiates FLEs (e.g., personality traits, emotional competence) in being able to cope with bad news disclosure?
Delivery phase Bad news disclosure (*Step 4*)	Training and protocol • What training would best equip FLEs with the right skills and knowledge for bad news disclosure? • To what extent might role-playing or simulation exercises better prepare FLEs for bad news disclosure? • Can protocols help FLEs undertake bad news disclosure? • What impact would preestablished service scripts or guidelines have on bad news disclosure by FLEs? • How can organizations empower FLEs to exercise autonomy and discretion in bad news disclosure while still adhering to organizational guidelines and standards? Organizational support • Does FLE teamwork and managerial support determine the overall effectiveness of bad news disclosure? • How do bad news disclosure strategies vary across industries and service contexts? • What role does the level of perceived management support play in shaping the communication style of FLEs engaged in bad news disclosure to customers? Communication strategies • What communication strategies do FLEs employ to disclose bad news? • How do FLEs adapt their communication strategies in particularly challenging or sensitive bad news disclosure situations? • How do FLEs manage the balance between being transparent and compassionately conveying bad news? • What role does ongoing feedback and performance evaluation play in shaping the communication skills of FLEs, specifically for bad news disclosure? • What role do organizational policies and guidelines play in shaping FLEs' communication strategies for bad news disclosure? • To what extent do customers' emotional reactions, such as anger, disappointment, or understanding, vary with the communication style and approach used by FLEs during bad news disclosure? • What role does the clarity and transparency of the information provided by FLEs play in shaping customers' perceptions and acceptance of the bad news disclosure? • Which tactics are the most effective for soothing customers' perceived pain and discomfort? In particular, • In which circumstances is humor beneficial? • In which circumstances is being straightforward (versus sugarcoating) beneficial (or detrimental)? • When should specific communication channels (e.g., face-to-face, telephone, text message, email, letter) be used by FLEs?
Transition phase Focus on regulating customer emotions (*Step 5*)	Customer emotions • What role does the perceived empathy of the FLE play in moderating customers' negative emotional responses to bad news disclosure? • Does the timing of bad news disclosure (e.g., immediate vs. delayed) affect customers' responses? • What types of negative emotions (e.g., distress, anger, disappointment, frustration) are most commonly experienced by customers receiving bad news disclosure from FLEs? • Can FLE–customer rapport regulate customer emotions resulting from bad news disclosure? • How does bad news severity affect the intensity and type of negative emotions experienced by customers? • How does the emotional state of the FLE disclosing the bad news influence customers' emotional reactions? • How do different methods for bad news disclosure (e.g., in-person, phone, email) affect the intensity of customers' negative emotions?

Table 4 (continued)

Topic	Illustrative research questions
Transition phase Focus on possible solution(s) (*Step 6*)	Potential solutions or alternatives • What types of solutions or alternatives are most effective in mitigating customers' negative emotions after bad news disclosure? • How does the severity of the bad news affect the intensity and type of negative emotions experienced by customers? • Can the timing of presenting solutions or alternatives affect customers' reactions to bad news? • How does a solution or alternative, offered along with the bad news, affect customers' emotional responses? • What follow-up actions might be taken by FLEs after bad news disclosure? • What are the most common barriers to successful implementation of alternative solutions?
Potential marketing-related outcomes	Customer-level outcomes • What impact does bad news disclosure have on customer-related marketing outcomes (e.g., customer satisfaction, citizenship behavior, loyalty, future purchase intentions, word-of-mouth communications)? • How might negative customer emotions (e.g., anger, denial, powerlessness) be minimized to lessen the impact of bad news disclosure on customer-related marketing outcomes? • Can the service delivery process be redesigned to facilitate bad news disclosure during the customer journey? • How do customers' perceptions of a lack of control or limited familiarity with the FLE or the service in a bad news disclosure situation shape the customer experience? • What technology and digital communication tools might be leveraged to facilitate more empathetic and effective interactions between FLEs and customers during bad news disclosure? • How might bad news disclosure be "softened" to minimize its consequences for customers? • In which circumstances do customer resources (e.g., financial, time, psychological aspects, social status) appear most affected by bad news disclosure? • How do customers perceive the empathy and professionalism of FLEs when receiving bad news, and how does this perception affect their overall satisfaction with the service encounter? • Do customers' individual differences (e.g., personality traits, culture, communication preferences) influence their emotions and coping mechanisms in response to bad news disclosure from FLEs?
	FLE-level outcomes • To what extent do individual personality traits and communication preferences of FLEs affect the stress they experience when disclosing bad news? • What are the most salient FLE thoughts, emotions, and behaviors that result from bad news disclosure? • What personal characteristics (e.g., age, gender, gender match with customer, emotional competence, work experience) and personality traits influence the distress FLEs experience with bad news disclosures? • How does the FLE's perception of control or empowerment (or lack thereof) to offer alternatives reduce stress in disclosing bad news? • What effect does frequently disclosing bad news have on FLEs' morale and job satisfaction? • When might nonhuman agents (i.e., robots) be used in place of FLEs to disclose bad news, to maximize the service experience for customers and minimize the distress FLEs experience? • When (or in what conditions) are FLEs most likely to underestimate the severity of the bad news for the customer, and what impact does it have on customers? • What role do performance metrics and incentives play in driving FLEs' behaviors and attitudes when disclosing bad news? How can these metrics be aligned with the goal of enhancing customer experience? • How do customer expectations regarding service recovery following bad news disclosure influence their evaluation of FLEs? • How do FLEs' individual differences (e.g., personality traits, culture, and communication preferences) influence the coping mechanisms they use to deal with bad news disclosure?
	Organization-level outcomes • Do customer satisfaction levels, customer loyalty, brand image, or operational efficiency change after customers receive bad news? • What communication strategies for bad news disclosure are most effective in minimizing customer pain and maintaining the customer–organization relationship? • How does the level of trust customers have in the organization shift after bad news disclosure? • How do customer expectations regarding resolution of the situation, following bad news disclosure, influence customer perceptions of the organization? • How do customers perceive the organization's transparency and honesty after bad news is communicated? • Can feedback received from customers after bad news disclosure inform innovations and improvements in services or processes? • Does poor bad news disclosure prompt customers to share their experience on social media (including potentially negative reviews)? What influences do social media have when customers experience effective bad news disclosure?

Table 4 (continued)

Topic	Illustrative research questions
Additional research topics	Bad news characteristics • Which characteristics of the bad news influence its disclosure (e.g., FLE perceived severity, customer perceived severity, inconvenience, attribution of fault)? • How does the nature and severity of the bad news, including its perceived impact on the customer, moderate the relationship between the preparation efforts of FLEs and the overall customer experience? • In what conditions do customers prefer having bad news disclosed by technology versus by a FLE? • For what types of bad news might the use of technology enhance the customer's experience?
	Boundary conditions • How bad news disclosure strategies differ when pre-established rapport is present with the customer? • What other moderating factors influence or amplify the impact of bad news disclosure on customer-, FLE-, or organization-level outcomes? • What influence does the type of service have on bad news disclosure (e.g., hedonic vs. utilitarian services, embarrassing service encounters, technology-driven encounters, public vs. private services)? • How does the setting influence the disclosure of bad news (e.g., public vs. private, face-to-face vs. telephone vs. online chat vs. text messages vs. email)? • What role could the presence of other customers have on bad news disclosure and customer responses?
	Methodological issues • Can experiments be designed to identify the most useful bad news disclosure tactics, actions, or combinations? • What conditions are needed to support observational methods to examine bad news disclosure? • How might text analysis tools be used to reveal more effective bad news disclosure practices? • How might secondary data (e.g., organizational records, customer service logs, recorded telephone conversations, chat session transcripts) identify patterns and draw conclusions about the impact of disclosing bad news? • When using robots to disclose bad news, what information can they collect to better understand the phenomenon (e.g., facial expressions, customer responses)?

strategies (verbal and nonverbal) and their distinct abilities to mitigate customers' pain and discomfort resulting from bad news disclosure also are needed. In certain settings, different bad news disclosure methods (e.g., face-to-face, online chat, telephone, email) might be more or less effective or preferred by customers.

Transition phase of bad news disclosure

Finally, FLEs' responses to customer emotions after the interaction (Step 5), including their ability to regulate customer emotions, are key to a full understanding of the transition phase. Scholars might examine the frequency and intensity of specific types of negative emotions (e.g., distress, anger, disappointment, frustration) that customers experience in reacting to the bad news. As we mentioned, multiple customer resources (e.g., emotional, financial, mental) could be threatened by the consequences associated with the bad news disclosure. The more customer resources are threatened, the more likely customers are to experience strong emotions. Identifying which emotions are associated with which customer resources could help inform best practices for bad news disclosure.

Ideally, FLEs also can identify solutions that benefit recipients of the bad news disclosure (Step 6). A deeper dive into which customer resources come under threat due to the consequences associated with the bad news disclosure might reveal how FLEs can best assist customers in retaining, protecting, or expanding those various resources (Web Appendix A). Another topic of interest pertains to the extent to which FLE empowerment and perceived organization support might facilitate the search for and identification of suitable alternatives, to address the situation the customer faces because of the bad news disclosure.

Potential marketing outcomes

This article establishes a conceptual and theoretical foundation for understanding bad news disclosure and for continued research into its impacts on key customer- and organization-level outcomes, in addition to the impacts on FLEs. Table 4 offers some research suggestions.

Customer-level outcomes We examine bad news disclosure from the FLE's perspective while we acknowledge that additional insights pertaining to marketing-related outcomes could be gained from a customer perspective. For example, scholars might explore how individual differences, such as customers' personality traits, cultural background, and communication preferences, influence their emotional, attitudinal, and behavioral responses to bad news disclosure from FLEs. Another research stream might determine how to design the service delivery process to facilitate bad news disclosure during the customer journey.

FLE-level outcomes Organizations are likely to benefit from improved FLE well-being and mental health and reduced FLE stress—if FLEs can best prepare for bad news disclosure. As Table 4 indicates, multiple research issues remain regarding FLEs' thoughts, emotions, and behaviors in a bad news disclosure context. We propose several critical research questions: What effect does frequently disclosing bad news have on FLE morale and job satisfaction? What role do performance metrics and incentives play in driving FLEs' behaviors and attitudes when disclosing bad news? Do FLEs' perceptions of autonomy or empowerment influence their attempts to offer alternatives or reduce the stress associated with disclosing bad news?

Organization-level outcomes Scholars should examine the impact of well- (or poorly) executed bad news disclosure on key marketing-related outcomes, such as customer satisfaction levels, customer loyalty, brand image, and operational efficiency. Understanding which bad news disclosure communication strategies (in terms of content and channel) are most effective for minimizing customer pain and maintaining the customer–organization relationship also is critical. A related research direction might address the effects on customers' trust or perceptions of the organization's transparency and honesty, according to how the bad news disclosure is communicated. Finally, we call for research into the long-term financial impacts of bad news disclosure on the organization and its survival.

Additional research topics

Several additional topics for continued research extend beyond the parameters that we were able to investigate within the scope of the present study.

Boundary conditions As shown in Fig. 1, several moderators are likely to play a role in strengthening (or mitigating) both FLEs' stress when recognizing that they need to reveal bad news and customers' distress when receiving the news. Yet, as our research is qualitative, further empirical validation is needed to confirm the relevance of the moderators we uncovered. For instance, experimental designs could examine when pre-established rapport heightens or mitigates the level of stress experienced by FLEs when recognizing they have bad news to disclose to their customers.

Further, qualitative research with customers could be conducted to find further support for the moderators we report in Fig. 1 (e.g., customer perceived severity and customer familiarity with the service) but also to uncover other potential moderators suggested in Table 4 (such as service type, channel used for bad news disclosure, or the presence of other customers). In particular, in-depth interviews with customers could be conducted to find further support for the customer-level moderators discussed by FLEs reported in Fig. 1 but also to uncover new ones. For instance, the type of service being provided (e.g., embarrassing service encounters, hedonic vs. utilitarian services, technology-driven encounters, public vs. private services) could determine the level of distress experienced by consumers when receiving bad news. For example, given the distinct characteristics of utilitarian and hedonic services (Barrett et al., 2024), bad news disclosure might be more impactful in utilitarian contexts than hedonic contexts; utilitarian services (e.g., insurance services) are usually closely tied to essential customer needs (e.g., financial security) while hedonic services (e.g., entertainment services) usually target non-essential ones (e.g., enjoyment and pleasure). Further empirical studies with customers are needed to examine the potential moderating impact of this type of service.

Methodological issues Research into bad news disclosure would benefit from more diverse methodological approaches. As we noted, the CIT method has some limitations and risks, such as depending on memory (and thus prone to recall bias), revealing the most extreme (i.e., "critical") issues, and misinterpreting or misunderstanding respondents' stories (Gremler, 2004). Although it works well as an exploratory method, experimental approaches might identify the most useful bad news disclosure tactics (or combinations), as well as their boundary conditions, in various situations. In addition, observational methods and text analyses (e.g., of recorded telephone interactions or online chat sessions) might further our understanding of the bad news disclosure process.

In summary, our examination of how FLEs disclose bad news to customers suggests the need for continued research efforts to improve our understanding of how this ubiquitous task can be undertaken effectively. In Table 4, we highlight additional issues, related to FLEs' preparation prior to disclosing bad news, the disclosure itself, the transition after bad news disclosure, and various marketing outcomes that might be affected. We hope this research agenda triggers additional investigations of bad news disclosure—a concept relevant to all service industries.

Conclusion

Bad news disclosure is a critical consideration for virtually every service organization. Situations that lead to bad news for customers are unavoidable, but disclosing it to them can engender stress for FLEs and distress among customers, with relevant implications for both FLE and customer experiences, as well as organizational performance. It is incumbent on service organizations to ensure that FLEs are well-prepared to deliver diverse types of bad news and anticipate various customer reactions, once they understand the threats to their resources. Some practitioners may assume bad news disclosure is rare, but our research indicates it is ubiquitous, as well as daunting for FLEs, who seldom receive training to help them undertake it. Having recognized this frequent challenge in service encounters, managers can provide more appropriate, timely, and evidence-based resources to help FLEs undertake bad news disclosure, while also limiting

FLEs' exposure to excessive work stress. With greater understanding of bad news disclosure in service encounters, service providers may be able to devise better communication strategies and behaviors, which can enhance customers' experience while also minimizing FLE stress. When both employee and customer experiences with bad news disclosure improve, organizations can expect beneficial organizational (e.g., financial) outcomes, in addition to critical marketing and human resource benefits.

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Delcourt: Conceptualization, methodology, supervision of data collection, formal analysis, writing original draft, review and editing, data visualization, project administration.

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Declarations

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