Employees have become an inevitable part of company image. But when employers make judgements and hire on the basis of attracting the “right” kind of people, they leave themselves open to charges of discrimination.

US clothing retailer Abercrombie & Fitch found this out the hard way. It was recently ruled against in a long running court case brought by a young Muslim woman who was denied a job at the retailer because she wore a headscarf.

Abercrombie & Fitch has since replaced its infamous “look policy” which banned caps and black clothing and sought people with a “preppy style”, with a new dress code it says allows customer service staff to be “more individualistic”. It has also changed its hiring practices to not consider attractiveness. Store staff, previously referred to as “models” by the company are now “brand representatives”.

Closer to home, fitness retailer Lorna Jane recently raised the ire of some Australians by advertising for a “Receptionist/Fit Model”, outlining specific body size requirements. It later clarified that it had decided to combine a traditional back-office role with a front office one so that the successful applicant could “liaise directly with customers on a day-to-day basis, receive their feedback and allow Lorna Jane to deliver an even better product to benefit our customers and their active lifestyles”.

**Beyond the ‘right attitude’**

In a recent study we set out to find how customer perceptions were impacted by the appearance of customer service staff. We investigated the increasing importance of having employees with not only the “right” attitudes, but also “right look” and “right sound” in service encounters in the apparel retail sector.

The qualitative study included a sample of customers of leading Australian fashion retailers. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with 51 customers. Half of the sample were female and the average age of the customers was 29 (the youngest being 18 and the oldest 61).

**‘Matching’ and ‘mirroring’ effects**

We found customers tend to approach store staff that look similar to them. They also prefer to approach staff of their own age and same gender for help or ask questions associated with fashion. In some cases, customers whose English is not their first language also prefer staff who can speak their native language.

“I am an Asian, and it is quite clear that my friends and I do prefer to be served by someone from our country. Especially, for some of people, whom I know of, who are not comfortable with speaking English… Yes, this goes for both men and women.”

“As a Muslim woman, I would like to talk to a female staff rather than a male. I prefer to talk to someone who come from or look like they are from the same country as me. … Yet, I do not like to talk to a man.”

Customers are more inclined to “match” or “mirror” their age, gender, race and ethnicity with customer service staff in more involved buying situations than in simple and less risky occasions, such as trying to locate a product in store.

Customers in certain situations are likely to ‘mirror’ customer service staff at the stores they shop at.
While not extensively investigated in the service encounter literature, the concept of “mirroring” has been established in many other domains such as psychology. As such, it is not a completely new idea. This “mirroring” impact has been explained in social identity theory as a person often puts greater value on “in-group” members who have shared characteristics.

Customers also use age and gender as a non-verbal cue in a “matching” process to decide if a staff member can offer trustworthy advice. In other words, customers attempt to “match” the age and/or gender of a frontline employee with their expectations of what a person with expertise should look like.

Many customers claim that the good appearance of the sales assistant and the managers helps them to hold back their anger in response to service failure at a certain level.

“I don’t know why, …. But I will try to hold my anger when I see a good looking sales assistant.”

“I will be more polite with an older person. … Yes, I will be less polite and straight forward to a younger person.”

They also admit that at some point in time they are willing to visit the store again because of the appearance of the customer service staff.

“My friend and I always come back to this section because of the sales person - he is very cute… Well, most of the time we just come to look for the guy… We sometimes buy clothes in that section too.”

“Yes, I used to go back to a shop just to see someone… But not anymore though, that when I was much younger.”

Abercrombie and Fitch hired male employees specifically to work shirtless.

Gender in service encounters

Our study also found that many gay men would be happier to interact with another gay service employee. However, staff handsomeness did not impact on the gay customers’ decision to approach the staff for advice. Nevertheless, some gay men said they prefer to simply see rather than talk to good-looking staff.

“I only like looking at a cute guy… I guess I am just too shy to talk. But you know, this is part of window shopping… ha ha ha.”

“It does not matter if they are handsome or not. I find them the same.”

Some lesbian customers said the gender of the sales staff had minor to no impact on their decision to approach someone for advice.

“I am happy to get help from anyone … man, woman, lesbian or gay … I am happy with any of them. … At the same time, I am expecting them to treat everybody equally.”

“Personally, I would prefer to talk to women, but I also do not mind talking to men.”
In short, the visible diversity of staff influences customers in a service encounter and, depending on the purchase occasions, customers prefer to, for example, interact with older/younger or male/female staff. In general, having staff who share the same appearance as customers may deliver a competitive advantage to retailers.