

COMPARING THE COMMUNICATION CHARACTERISTICS OF HIGH COMPETENCE AND LOW COMPETENCE CUSTOMER SERVICE REPRESENTATIVES

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ABSTRACT

When dissatisfied customers complain directly to a company, customer service representatives are responsible for communicating with these customers and resolving their complaints. Despite the importance of communication in this process, little is known about the communication characteristics of high competence and low competence customer service representatives. To address this issue, we content analyzed the communication used by high competence and low competence customer service representatives in a regional telephone service company. Our results revealed that, compared to low competence representatives, high competence service representatives talk more about attribution issues and their interactions with dissatisfied customers are significantly longer. Based on these results, we recommend that customer service managers should train their service representatives to focus more on identifying the causes of customers' problems. Also, we recommend that service representatives' performance evaluations should be based on their ability to resolve customers' complaints, not on how quickly they can process customers' calls.

INTRODUCTION

Customer service managers in progressive companies increasingly encourage dissatisfied consumers to communicate their complaints directly to company service representatives via toll-free telephone lines (Quintanilla and Gibson 1994). These managers hope that their service representatives can effectively respond to these dissatisfied consumers' complaints so that they are more inclined to engage in repeat purchase behavior and less prone to use negative word-of-mouth communication regarding the companies' products and services.

Communication is widely recognized as a

fundamental element of this complaining process (Fornell 1988; Garrett, Meyers, and Camey 1991). If customer service representatives can communicate effectively with dissatisfied consumers, there is a much greater likelihood that these consumers' complaints can be resolved to their satisfaction and to the companies' benefit. In contrast, if service representatives are incompetent communicators, they may exacerbate the complaining consumers' sense of dissatisfaction and cause their companies additional harm. Thus, customer service managers would ideally prefer to have service representatives who are highly competent communicators. But, despite the acknowledged importance of customer service representatives, little is known about the comparative communication characteristics of high competence and low competence service representatives.

OBJECTIVE

Given the paucity of research regarding communication and customer service representatives, our goal in this paper is to analyze the differences in communication characteristics between high competence and low competence customer service representatives. We first briefly review the literature in marketing regarding communication in complaint interactions, and also the literature in the communication discipline regarding communication competence. We then pose our exploratory research questions and describe the methodology we employed to address these questions. After presenting our results, we discuss the potential implications of our findings.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Communication in the Consumer Complaining Process

While research during the past two decades

regarding consumer satisfaction/dissatisfaction and complaining behavior has generated a voluminous literature (for recent reviews, see Andreasen 1988 and Yi 1990), relatively little research attention has concentrated specifically on communication in the consumer complaining process (Garrett, Meyers, and Camey 1991). Those few studies that have examined communication have shown that companies are more likely to respond to consumers' complaints as the quality of writing in a complaint letter improves (Boschung 1976; Pearson 1976). Also, the word length of companies' written responses to consumers' complaint letters is significantly greater than for responses to consumers' letters of praise (Smart and Martin 1992). Other studies in this area have demonstrated that companies' communicative responses to dissatisfied consumers' complaints may affect these consumers' attitudes and repurchase intentions. For example, consumers are most likely to be satisfied when companies offer some form of compensation (Baer and Hill 1994; Clark, Kaminski, and Rink 1992; Lewis 1983; Pearson 1976) and express an interest in remedying the consumers' problems (Krentler and Cosenza 1987). Also, dissatisfied consumers' perceptions of the appropriateness of companies' communicative responses to their complaints appear to influence their repurchase behaviors (Gilly 1987; Lewis 1983).

These studies have certainly helped to illuminate the importance of communication as a critical element in complaint interactions. However, we think these studies all share an important limitation. Specifically, most major companies with complaint management systems now receive the majority of their complaints from consumers through toll-free telephone lines (Quintanilla and Gibson 1994). Despite this increased use of verbal communication between complaining consumers and service representatives, virtually all of these previous studies have focused upon written communication (Baer and Hill 1994; Boschung 1976; Clark, Kaminski and Rink 1992; Cobb, Walgren and Hollowed 1987; Diener 1980; Kendall and Russ 1975; Krentler and Cosenza 1987; Lee 1968; Lewis 1983; Martin and Smart 1988; Pearson 1976; Smart and Martin 1992). As more companies encourage their customers to voice

complaints to service representatives via toll-free telephone lines, there is a clear need to devote more research attention to this verbal communication medium.

Communication Competence

Over the past two decades, communication researchers have become increasingly interested in determining those factors that produce competent communicators. Much of this research has been conducted on interpersonal relationships (Pavitt and Haight 1986; Spitzberg and Cupach 1984, 1989; Rubin 1990), but recently some investigators have begun to investigate competence in organizational settings as well (Diez, 1984; Monge et al. 1982; Penley et al. 1991; Sypher 1984). In general, researchers define communication competence as a "person's ability to interact flexibly with others in a dyadic setting so that the communication is seen as appropriate and effective for the context" (Rubin et al. 1993, p. 210).

Researchers in this domain have typically utilized two main conceptual perspectives to study interpersonal communication competence: social cognition and social skills (Rubin 1990). Researchers from the first perspective--social cognition--are interested in determining an individual's knowledge of which behaviors to enact. The second perspective, and the one more appropriate for this paper, involves examination of the actual communicative behaviors executed in a certain situation. This latter group of communication competence researchers (also referred to as communication skills theorists) view competence as skills specific to a given context (interpersonal, organizational, media, intercultural, etc.). For example, communication behaviors such as affiliation, social relaxation, empathy, flexibility and interaction management skills have been posited as important to the interpersonal communication context (Wiemann 1977). Likewise, interaction management and behavioral flexibility skills have been found to be important in organizational contexts (Diez 1984; Haas and Seibert 1988).

Along these same lines, understanding more fully which communication behaviors characterize competent service interactions would seem to have important and long-lasting consequences for

service oriented organizations. Certainly this information could serve an important function in customer service representative training programs. On a larger scale, being able to distinguish between high and low competence service representatives could figure into criteria development for performance evaluations, as well as hiring and firing practices. In this study, we hope to come closer to that goal by investigating the communication behaviors of both high and low competence service representatives in actual conversations with complaining consumers.

RESEARCH QUESTIONS

Because this is, as far as we could ascertain, the first research study in either marketing or communication to analyze the communication characteristics of high competence and low competence customer service representatives, we posit the following three exploratory research questions:

Q1) Are there significant differences in the communication content spoken by high competence and low competence customer service representatives?

Q2) Are there significant differences between high competence and low competence customer service representatives in terms of the overall length of their communication interactions with complaining consumers?

Q3) Are there significant differences in the relative amount of communication spoken by service representatives and consumers based on the competence of service representatives?

METHODOLOGY

The data in this paper were derived from a larger research study we recently conducted regarding communication in consumer complaint interactions with customer service representatives. In this section we first describe the category system and content analysis procedures we used for this larger research project. Then we will explain how the high competence and low competence service representatives were selected

from this larger data base to address the specific research questions posed in this paper.

Category System

Although some researchers argue that consumers do not necessarily have to be dissatisfied to register a complaint with a company (Oliver 1987), most researchers agree that complaints are generally based on consumers' perceptions of dissatisfaction with a purchase experience (Andreasen 1988; Fornell 1976). Thus, because complaints are generally viewed as communicated expressions of dissatisfaction (TARP 1985), the communication content of complaint interactions should reflect closely consumers' bases of dissatisfaction. That is, the variables that consumers use to evaluate consumption experiences should be evidenced in their externalized expressions of dissatisfaction (i.e., complaints).

While a variety of explanations for consumer satisfaction/ dissatisfaction (CS/D) formation have been advanced, we based our category system on four frequently researched bases of consumer dissatisfaction: expectations, performance, equity, and attribution (Oliver 1993; Oliver and DeSarbo 1988; Yi 1990). In addition to these four categories, a fifth category identified as "other" statements was added to our category scheme. This final category was necessary because complaint interactions contain a variety of statements which are not explicitly related to complaints. Such statements include greetings ("Hello, this is Susan. How may I help you?"), information inquiries during the telephone conversation ("What is your phone number?", "What is your address?"), closings at the end of the conversation ("That's it, OK.", "Bye-bye.", "We'll call you back."), conversational maintenance terms ("Uh-huh.", "Umm.", "I see.", "Well, you know."), and casual conversation ("How is the weather today?").

The five categories that comprise our category system then are formally defined as follows:

Expectations: Communication that concerns the anticipated, predicted, or expected performance of a product or service.

Performance: Communication that describes or explains how a customer's product or service performs, including the types of problems a customer is experiencing.

Equity: Communication that addresses the fairness of the relationship between a customer and a company, including each party's responsibilities.

Attribution: Communication that attempts to determine why a problem occurred or the causes of a problem.

Other Category: Basic communication that is used to conduct the conversational interaction, including greetings, closings, exchange of basic background information, and conversational maintenance terms.

Content Analysis Procedures

In this section we describe our data source, unitizing procedures, and coding procedures.

Data Source. A regional telephone service company permitted us to tape record telephone complaint interactions between their customer service representatives and dissatisfied consumers. This company is typical of many progressive customer service oriented companies in that it maintains a complaint management system in which dissatisfied consumers can call on a toll-free telephone line and express their complaints directly to company service representatives (TARP 1985, 1986). The purpose of this research study was explained to the service representatives in this company and they all agreed to participate. The service representatives were informed that we would periodically record some of their telephone conversations with customers over the course of several weeks. However, representatives were not informed when their individual calls were actually being recorded.

To protect the privacy interests of the company's customers, we signed an agreement in which we pledged to delete customers' names, addresses, and phone numbers from our data records for all customers whose calls were recorded for this study.

From a total of 27 service representatives employed by this company, we selected 17 for recording, based on the match between their work schedules and our authorized hours of access to company facilities. A total of 79.5 hours of complaint interactions were recorded, involving stratified random selection among the 17 representatives. Because of the prohibitively high costs of transcribing this entire data set, we selected 34.5 hours of these recordings (531 telephone calls) for transcription, again using a stratified random sample among the 17 representatives. These audio tapes were then transcribed by professional typists.

Unitizing Procedures. Unitizing is the process of identifying communication content units to be categorized (Folger, Hewes and Poole 1984; Spiggle 1994). After considering a variety of unitizing possibilities commonly used in communication research (e.g., individual words, sentences, turns-at-talk, and complete conversations), we concluded that sentences were the most appropriate unit of analysis for our research purposes. We chose sentences because consumers and service representatives appeared to express distinct thoughts in sentence form. In contrast, longer units of analysis, such as turns-at-talk or complete conversations, were not appropriate for our research because they usually contained multiple thoughts that should be coded in different categories in our category system. Also, shorter units of analysis, such as individual words, were not appropriate because they failed to capture the essence of consumers' and service representatives' conversational meaning. Unitizing rules were then developed to define complete sentences and other conversational segments that did not fit the conventional definition of a sentence. A copy of these unitizing rules is available from the authors. Using these unitizing rules, we identified and marked 17,792 content units (sentences) in these 531 calls between customers and service representatives.

Coding Procedures. Six coders (senior-level undergraduate students majoring in communication) were selected to code these 17,792 content units. These coders were provided with necessary background information regarding the

company and its complaint management system, but were not told the study's research questions. The coders were trained regarding the definitions of the categories in the category system, and practice coding sessions were conducted involving transcripts not included in the final data set. Copies of the coding instructions and the training manual are available from the authors. Given the large volume of data to content analyze in this study, we divided the coders into three teams of two coders per team, with each team coding approximately one-third of the data. We instructed the coders to work independently and not discuss their coding decisions with any other coders. The coders were directed to resolve any differences in their coding decisions when all coding was finished. If they could not reach consensus regarding the correct coding decision for any units, they were directed to consult with one of the authors for a final decision.

Intercoder reliability was calculated for each team of coders for their entire data sets. Both Cohen's kappa (1960), which has received widespread support for use in social science research, and Perreault and Leigh's (1989) statistic, which was recently introduced in the marketing research literature, were calculated. Using Cohen's kappa, the intercoder reliability results for the three teams were .89, .96, and .94. Using Perreault and Leigh's statistic, the results were .95, .98, and .97. While there are presently no universally accepted standards of acceptability for intercoder reliability results (Hughes and Garrett 1990), we believe our intercoder reliability results are quite high, especially given that this is a new line of research using a new category system.

Selection of High Competence and Low Competence Service Representatives

We asked the customer service managers (a team of three managers) in this company to identify for us, out of the total sample of 17 representatives involved in our larger research project, the 5 representatives whom they considered to be the most competent and the 5 representatives whom they considered to be the least competent. To make their selections, the managers relied on two sources of information.

First, they regularly monitor their service representatives' interactions with complaining customers. The managers then use this data to develop performance evaluations which are given to the service representatives. Second, the customer service managers in this company regularly survey their customers to determine their satisfaction with service representatives with whom they have interacted. Thus, the high and low competence service representatives were selected based on data from managers' performance evaluations and consumer feedback.

Based on these selections, we identified those interactions that involved the five high competence representatives (124 interactions) and those that involved the five low competence representatives (177 interactions) out of the total data base of 531 interactions. We then used the content units contained in these interactions to address our research questions, as we report in the next section.

RESULTS

Q1) Are there significant differences in the communication content spoken by high competence and low competence customer service representatives? To answer this research question, we compared what the five high competence and the five low competence representatives said in their interactions with complaining customers. As shown in Table 1, there are significant differences in the communication content spoken by high competence and low competence service representatives (chi-square = 20.4; $p < .001$). Most noticeably, the high competence service representatives talk comparatively more about attribution (19.8%) than do low competence service representatives (15.5%). In contrast, the low competence service representatives talk comparatively more than high competence service representatives (48.7% vs. 44.3%) about issues that were categorized in the "other" category. In the other three complaint-related categories (expectations, performance, and equity), there is relatively little difference between the high competence and low competence service representatives.

Q2) Are there significant differences between high competence and low competence customer

Table 1
Communication Content of
High Competence vs. Low Competence Service Representatives

Categories of Communication						
	Expectation	Performance	Attribution	Equity	Other	
High Competence Service Representatives						Row Total
# of units	2	96	483	774	1079	2434
row %	0.1	3.9	19.8	31.8	44.3	100.0
Low Competence Service Representatives						
# of units	5	116	419	847	1316	2703
row %	0.2	4.3	15.5	31.3	48.7	100.0
Column Total	7	212	902	1621	2395	5137
column %	0.1	4.1	17.6	31.6	46.6	100.0

Chi-Square = 20.4

significance < .001

service representatives in terms of the overall length of their communication interactions with complaining consumers? For this question we compared the average length of interactions (as measured by number of communication units spoken by both service representatives and consumers) between high competence service representatives (124 cases) and low competence service representatives (177 cases). Our results showed that interactions involving high competence representatives had an average of 36.5 units (i.e., sentences), while interactions involving

low competence representatives had an average of 30.3 units. Using a two-tailed t-test, our analysis revealed that this difference in means is significant at the .01 level ($t = 2.98$; d.f. = 299).

Q3) Are there significant differences in the relative amount of communication spoken by service representatives and consumers based on the competence of service representatives? As shown in Table 2, these results reveal that, in interactions involving high competence service representatives, these representatives speak 53.8% of the communication units, while the consumers speak

Table 2
Relative Amount of Communication Spoken by Service Representatives and Consumers
Based on Competence of Service Representative

		Competence of Service Representative		
		High	Low	Total
Service Representatives	Number of communication units	2434	2703	5137
	Column %	53.8%	50.5%	52.0%
Complaining Consumers	Number of communication units	2089	2653	4742
	Column %	46.2%	49.5%	48.0%
Total		4523	5356	9879
Chi-square = 10.99		significance < .001		

46.2% of the units. In contrast, in interactions involving low competence service representatives, these representatives speak 50.5% of the communication units and consumers speak 49.5% of the units. Thus, high competence service representatives talk significantly more than low competence service representatives (53.8% vs. 50.5%) in their interactions with complaining consumers (chi-square = 10.99; $p < .001$).

Before we discuss these results in more detail, we highlight the potential limitations associated with this study.

LIMITATIONS

Three limitations restrict the potential validity of the results we obtained in this study. First, the interpretation of the empirical results obtained in this study must take into account our use of data from one company in one specific industry (local telephone service). Future analysis of service representatives in other companies and industries may reveal differences from the results we obtained in our study. For example, research shows that industry structure affects dissatisfied consumers' response choices (Andreasen 1985;

Singh 1991). Perhaps industry structure also impacts the type of communication used by service representatives in complaint interactions.

Second, this analysis is based on data regarding just 10 service representatives (5 high competence representatives and 5 low competence representatives). This small sample size clearly limits the robustness of our results.

Third, the communication used by service representatives is likely to be impacted by the training method employed by various companies. The particular company involved in this study uses a highly standardized approach in which all service representatives are trained to follow basically identical procedures when interacting with complaining customers. Given that, it was interesting to see that differences between service representatives still emerged. Perhaps the communication differences between high competence and low competence service representatives may be even more pronounced in those companies that encourage their service representatives to customize their interactions according to various customers' needs.

DISCUSSION

Even with these limitations, we believe our study's results offer some interesting issues for discussion. In this section we take each of the three research questions we addressed and discuss our findings.

Communication Content of High Competence and Low Competence Service Representatives

When we compared the communication spoken by high competence and low competence service representatives, as shown in Table 1, we found that high competence service representatives focused comparatively more of their conversation on identifying the potential causes of consumers' problems (attribution category). The following excerpt is a good example of how one of the high competence service representatives in this company expends considerable effort to trace the likely causes of a customer's troubles:

Customer (C): Yeah, it's popping and cracking and sometimes the phone will ring and sometimes it won't and I try to dial some numbers and I get....they say my number is no longer in existence or something.

Service representatives (SR): You get recordings on the line then?

C: I get records or something like this.

SR: Okay. Do you only have one telephone at the house?

C: Yes sir.

SR: Okay, then do you feel that there could be anything wrong with the telephone? I mean, if you've got a telephone that is bad on you, like the key pad or anything? Is it a rotary or is it touch tone?

C: It's a touch.

SR: Okay. It's very possible that it could be giving you some trouble also. I've tested your line and I'm not showing any problem on the

line. Now the only way you could tell if it was your telephone would be to take your telephone over to somebody else's house where you know the service is working and see if it works there, or even borrow somebody's phone and plug it into your house and see if it does the same thing.

C: Alright.

SR: That's about the only way you can test your phone since you only have one of them.

C: Yeah.

SR: Now, I'm not showing any problem on the line. Now if you want, I can have them check the line out since you've got in-line service.

C: Do you hear that popping?

SR: Yeah, I hear that. It's very possible, you know, it could be the telephone causing that, if it's going bad on you, or it could even be a bad jack.

C: Yeah.

SR: But now I can have a repairman check the line out for you if you'd like, and in the meantime, what I would do would be to check your phone out. Don't go buy another one because it may not be the phone itself but would be to try like what I told you to try it at somebody else's house or borrow somebody's just for a moment and see if it makes a difference.

In the consumer satisfaction literature, the importance of providing quick and equitable resolutions to consumers' complaints is widely accepted (TARP 1985, 1986). But, our findings suggest that dissatisfied consumers also appreciate service representatives who take the effort and time to attempt to identify the possible causes of their performance problems, as the preceding excerpt represents. There may be a couple of potential explanations for this relationship. Perhaps complaining consumers have more

confidence in service representatives who appear to have the knowledge and expertise to identify and understand their problems during the telephone interaction. Or maybe consumers perceive that service representatives' attribution communication reveals greater caring and concern for their welfare and predicament.

Length of Communication Interactions

Regarding our second research question, we found that those communication interactions involving high competence service representatives were significantly longer than those interactions involving low competence service representatives. This finding rather clearly suggests that customer service representatives who spend more time communicating with their customers are perceived to be more competent than those service representatives who appear to rush through their interactions with complaining customers. This positive link between competence and length of conversations indicates that complaining consumers apparently value service representatives who take extra time to discuss individual customers' complaints. This finding is consistent with recent literature regarding service quality which suggests that consumers generally appreciate service representatives who personalize their interactions with customers (Bitner, Booms, and Tetreault 1990; Surprenant and Solomon 1987).

Comparative Proportions of Communication Volume for Service Representatives and Consumers

Finally, as shown in Table 2, our results revealed that, when compared to low competence representatives, high competence service representatives talk relatively more than complaining consumers in their interactions. This finding suggests that high competence service representatives "take the lead" in their interactions with complaining consumers and are more active communicators. In contrast, low competence service representatives are less active communicators in their interactions with customers. This indicates that complaining customers appear to view more positively those service representatives who are more actively

engaged in communication in these complaint interactions. Perhaps dissatisfied consumers view this relatively increased level of communication as evidence of service representatives' willingness to resolve their problems.

IMPLICATIONS

This is the first study, as far as we know, to actually investigate the communication competence of customer service representatives. While more research is obviously needed in this area, we nonetheless believe our results yield some potentially important implications for customer service managers who are responsible for training and evaluating service representatives.

The link we found between high competence service representatives and their heightened use of attribution communication suggests that service managers may want to train their representatives to spend more time discussing with complaining consumers the potential causes of their problems. If so, service representatives must progress from being merely "information gatherers" who collect basic information regarding the nature of customers' problems, and instead become "problem solvers" who are capable of interpreting information provided by consumers. For service representatives to be able to do this, however, service managers may need to provide more training for their representatives to enable them to identify more readily various potential causes of problems.

The findings from our second and third research questions suggest that service representatives who are more active communicators are seen as more competent. This finding is striking because, based on our discussions with many customer service managers in a variety of companies and industries, we have found that most companies encourage their service representatives to complete their interactions with complaining consumers quickly. In fact, many service managers have told us that they carefully monitor their service representatives to evaluate how many customers they "handle" during a given time period. In addition, this measure is often used as a basis for evaluating service representative performance and determining compensation levels. Thus, if you are a service

representative in these organizations, the more complaining customers you handle in a given time period, the higher your evaluation.

Given our results in this study, we find this practice of evaluating and rewarding service representatives based on the volume of customers handled to be highly suspect. Instead, we would assert that service managers should pursue exactly the opposite approach. Rather than pushing their service representatives to process consumers' complaints quickly, service managers should encourage their representatives to focus more on satisfying each consumer's complaint as completely as possible. This means that service representatives should feel free to take as much time as they feel is required to listen carefully and completely to each consumer problem, and then also to take as much time as needed to thoroughly discuss the possible causes of these problems and how they may be resolved. Quite simply, we believe the standard of service representative evaluation should shift from the volume of consumer complaints processed to the degree to which complaining consumers are satisfied in their interactions with service representatives.

CONCLUSION

As far as we know, this is the first study to evaluate the comparative communication used by high competence and low competence customer service representatives. Our findings revealed that high competence service representatives focus relatively more on identifying the potential causes of complaining consumers' problems (attribution). Also, we found that high competence service representatives are relatively more active communicators than are low competence service representatives. This finding is important because many customer service managers currently push their service representatives to process their interactions with complaining consumers as quickly as possible. Instead, we suggest that service managers should encourage their representatives to take as much time as necessary to satisfy each complaining consumer as completely as possible.

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