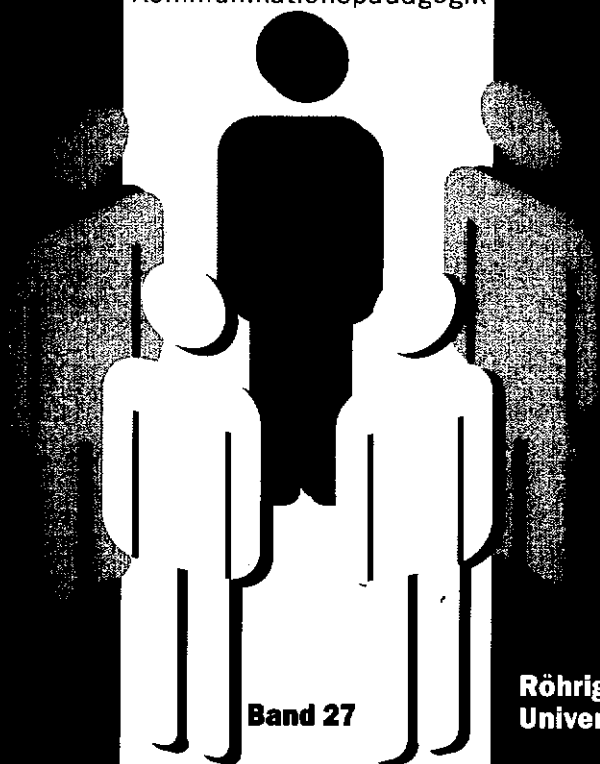


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# Applied Communication in Organizational and International Contexts

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## **Applied Communication in Customer Support**

A popular internet joke involves a customer calling a customer support representative (CSR) because his computer will not work. The screen is dark. The CSR asks if he has checked the power cord. The customer asks what a power cord is, and the CSR asks him to see if the computer is plugged into an electrical outlet. It is. Next the CSR asks him to check to make sure the monitor is connected to the computer. He has to be told that the monitor is the part that looks like a television screen. He says he cannot see whether the monitor is connected. The CSR tells him he must check it out and suggests that he prop his knee against the wall to get a better view. The customer then explains that the real problem is that he cannot see anything. Why? Because the power is out to the entire neighborhood. So, the CSR tells him to box up the computer and send it back to the company. Is it serious? Yes, it certainly is. "You're too stupid to own a computer."

This joke is funny if the hearer identifies with the CSR in this joke and believes that the response to the customer is appropriate. Every CSR has experienced conversations that are just about this absurd, but usually wisdom dictates that customer should be handled more carefully. We will suggest that the function of customer service is to provide an opportunity for the customer to be heard. Customer service is about communication, and attending to the communication aspects of customer support activities can enhance customer voice with implications for customer loyalty and organizational vitality.

### **Studying Customer Support as Applied Communication**

The student of communication interested in organizational applications finds within sales and marketing a surfeit of rhetoric designed for the customer and potential customer. The basic Aristotelian rhetoric applies to nearly all sales and marketing. The most successful

messages resonate with the intended customer audience. Audience analysis occurs through customer satisfaction surveys, and, of course, through sales results. Business firms find it useful to continue these rhetorical activities in the process of providing customer support. The organization seeks to maintain a positive relationship with the customer in the hope of winning repeat business or at least a positive image in the marketplace. Almost all large corporations create a customer support department that reports to the executive manager in charge of sales and marketing. Reinsch and Turner (2006) argue that this activity should be studied as essentially rhetorical in nature, and van Mulken and van der Meer (2005) have studied the rhetorical strategies implicit in the customer support e-mail responses of Dutch and American firms.

Of course, an effective customer support unit does more than communicate; it must arrange for repairs, or new parts, or better service, but its work requires communication in various media. At least in the high technology firm, it often occurs as toll-free telephone conversations or as computer-mediated messages. Customer service requires communication, although that requirement is becoming less obvious as more of customer service is handled by machine. Initially, customer service could be thought of as primarily dyadic and face-to-face (e.g., Ford & Etienne, 1994). Many of our communication models suggest this approach, but in many sectors of the economy, such communication has largely been replaced by mediated communication that includes, among other channels, "e-mail responses, chat rooms, Web collaboration, and voice-over IP responses" and the view of customer support as dyadic communication has been criticized (Johnson, 2001). In our more recent experience in the high technology sector, much customer support activity now involves completely automated processes, up to, and including, the actual shipping of replacement parts.

Still, the worst customer service issues require human intervention. The communication skills and characteristics of customer service personnel have been studied. Downing (2004) taps into the literature on communication and the knowledge worker by arguing that the customer service representative should be thought of as a new type of knowledge worker. One quantitative study showed that customer

support personnel can influence customer satisfaction by their thoroughness, knowledgeableness, and preparedness, even though their messages are mediated by telephone, e-mail, or online chat (Froehle, 2006). In our own research involving a high technology company described below, we found that customer service personnel were selected based on their communication skills, especially the ability to control the conversation, present a professional image, and negotiate conflict over the telephone (Fox, 1993, 12). De Ruyter and Wetzels (2000) demonstrated empirically that perceptions of being listened to, especially attentiveness, were determinants of customer satisfaction in telephonic communication. Thus, in recent years, a growing number of scholars have studied the applied communication of customer service.

### **Studying Customer Voice**

One approach that allows us to consider the dyadic, human, and mediated communication of customer service as a whole, and to consider the organizational structures that impinge on it, is to study the way in which the customer support function enhances or restricts customer voice. Two of our graduate students at San Jose State University wrote theses that made this attempt. They analyzed customer support communication in the high technology industry in Silicon Valley. Richard Fox (1993) analyzed telephone conversations that occurred over toll-free telephone lines and eight years later Robert Barlow (2001) brought the discussion up to date by investigating computer-mediated customer support. The preponderance of high technology customer support is computer-mediated, but it works in tandem with the toll-free telephone conversation, especially when the most serious problems must be addressed (LaMonica, 1999; Barlow, 2001, 25-29).

Our research on toll-free telephone communication studied 50 different messages that came into a customer service department at a Fortune 500 disk drive manufacturer. The computer-mediated communication research used the web-based customer support structure at Cisco, the largest manufacturer of computer networking hardware.

We studied web pages, interviewed 37 customers, and analyzed customer survey results.

In both the toll-free telephone context and the computer-mediated context, we were interested in how communication functions to support the customer and in what ways customers' access to management might be constrained or enhanced in order to correct problems that cause the quality of products and services to deteriorate. Hirschman (1970) refers to complaints to management about deteriorating quality as "voice" and contrasts it to "exit." Applied to the customer, the concept means that the customer goes to the trouble to complain (voice) instead of simply using another vendor (exit). From the firm's perspective, voice is usually preferable to exit, and should be encouraged. If the firm is responsive to voice, customers' loyalty is rewarded and quality is restored or enhanced. Since the business firm needs its customers, it follows that the very vitality of the firm depends upon the nurturance of customer voice. Since the customer support personnel are those charged with the care and feeding of the customers, we would want the customers to be able to readily exercise voice and to get complaints handled by management in their routine communication with customer support. First, we would want to know how voice functions in this part of the organization.

### **Typologies of Customer Voice**

Typologies of customer voice can show us how communication functions in support of the customer. The study of communication functions is not a novel idea; several scholars have suggested that the elaboration of communication theory often begins with the analysis of communication functions (Weick, 1979; McQuail, 1987; Stohl and Redding, 1987).

Solicited or unsolicited. As we began to study voice in customer support settings we quickly realized that voice can be either solicited or unsolicited. Solicited voice usually occurs through some type of customer satisfaction survey or focus group, in which customers are asked directly for their evaluation of products and services and for any

complaints they might have to share with management. Customer voice also comes unbidden through channels designed to allow the customer to initiate communication. Unsolicited voice can be encouraged by structuring the organization to allow for it; to create practices, programs and events in which it is encouraged (Hegstrom, 2002). One such practice is to make toll free telephone lines to encourage the customer to contact the company.

Conversation types. Our first task in qualitatively analyzing the 50 tape recordings of telephone conversations of disk drive customers with CSR's was to sort them by type. In other words, the entire conversation served as the unit of analysis. Table 1 lists the categories and the relative frequency of their occurrence. Conversations were classified as RMA process (a return material authorization), status check/expedite, discrepancy resolution, call transfer/information requests, customer complaint resolution. The percentages obtained during our study reflect the relative frequencies of these conversation types at one point in time, a relatively static period. At other times, the percentage of complaints increase dramatically, as happened after an organizational change caused a failure in the shipping and receiving area. Table 1 also notes our other two typologies of customer service conversations, the thematic cycle and the interact or paired utterance.

**Table 1: Communication Functions in Customer Support Telephone Conversations**

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Conversation Type	
RMA process	35%
Status Check/expedite	11%
Discrepancy resolution	10%
Call transfer/information requests	41%
Customer complaint resolution	3%
Thematic Cycle	
Introduction/orientation	
Data Processing	
Persuasion/negotiation	
Closure	

Interact (Paired utterances)  
 Goal Convergence  
 Goal Divergence

Thematic cycle. After sorting the conversation types, we turned next to recurring themes in the conversations. These turned out to be the organizational patterns explicit in the conversations. Each conversation involves some kind of introduction/orientation ("Customer service, this is [name], may I help you?"), data processing ("Okay. Who did you purchase this unit from?"), persuasion/negotiation ("Even though the problem may be something else?"), and closure ("Okay, uhm, great. Well, thank you for your help. You're fast."). The customer service conversations rarely proceed linearly through these four themes, but often cycle back to a previous function or cast ahead too soon to closure. The occurrence of themes varies with conversation types. The persuasion/negotiation themes dominate customer complaint resolutions, for example.

Interacts. Finally, the smallest unit of analysis we studied was the interact which involved pairing each customer utterance with the following CSR utterance. We found at this level that the conversations with customer support personnel involve either convergent or divergent goal-seeking; both of these interaction characteristics require information-sharing and information seeking, although communicators converging on the same goal sort information for one another and communicators with divergent goals attempt to gain compliance. The convergent and divergent goal seeking is reflected in interacts that are either symmetrical or asymmetrical. In a symmetrical interaction the paired utterances line up and relate to one another. Note the symmetrical nature of this RMA request:

R: Customer service. This is [name]. May I help you?  
 C: Good morning. I need to get an RMA number, please.  
 R: Okay. Can you tell me, are you an end user or reseller?  
 C: Reseller.  
 R: And, where is it you normally purchase your [Company] products from?  
 C: [Distributor's name]

Each pair of utterances in this case is essentially a question from the customer support representative followed by a related answer from the customer. Contrast that conversation with the following one in which the customer lodges a complaint:

- C: Even though the problem might be something else?  
 R: Okay. The actual drive will be damaged then?  
 C: It is so minimal, so insignificant that I don't see anything...  
 R: Okay.  
 C: They pushed it in too much.  
 R: Okay, and it went into the circuit board?  
 C: And, then touched, uh, touched the PC board.  
 R: Okay, sir. [Company] would regard that as being customer damage.  
 C: Yeah, but I mean I, I, I, uh.  
 R: Okay. Let me explain this, sir.  
 C: It's hard to see, it's even hard to see the little chip off.  
 R: Okay, let...  
 C: On the PC board.

As the customer service representative attempts to get the customer to assume responsibility for the damage, the paired utterances are asymmetrical, questions are left unanswered and the CSR talks over the utterances of the customer.

After coding the conversations at the level of the interact, Fox noticed some connections between categories on this level and the two larger levels. For example, the nature of the interactions is related to conversation type and thematic shifts. Divergent goal seeking occurs more often in customer complaint resolutions; it also results in more thematic shifts in the conversations. Convergent goal seeking is predominant in all conversation types except for customer complaints.

Thus three levels of coding, the conversation type, thematic structures, and the interact help us understand how communication functions in the customer service telephone conversation. These are also the sites for customer voice. Voice doesn't just occur in instances of divergent goal seeking when the CSR is attempting to resolve a complaint. A customer gets heard and gets a response from management, for instance, when making an RMA request even though it may not be as obvious that this is customer voice as the complaint might be.



However, one-on-one conversations are not the only way that customer voice occurs, as can be discovered by researching the computer mediated communication (CMC) environment of customer service.

### **CMC Environment**

At Cisco, in a CMC environment, the customer can initiate either asynchronous or synchronous messages. Asynchronous messages include the use of auto-responders, personal email responses to a customer's email, and web feedback forms. Synchronous messages include "call me" buttons on a web-page and interactive chat session options. One customer responded favorably to the "call me" button as follows:

I tried it once and it worked very well. I was logged in, was looking around for some information, and I couldn't find it. I clicked on the *Contact Cisco* button and noticed the *Talk to Us Now—Cisco Live* button and went for it. After I entered my number, my phone rang in like 5 seconds. The person helped me out and I got what I needed.

Thus, customer voice can also move from a CMC environment to follow-up telephone calls. An inherent link exists between computer mediated communication and person-to-person communication in the customer support systems. The technology provides another way for customers to experience voice, and because it can be used to speed up response times, as in our Cisco case, it enhances the customer's voice experience. The customers see their needs readily addressed, as the following two examples attest:

A few weeks ago, I got so mad I couldn't find the information I needed on their Web site, so I fired off an email, you know, telling them how frustrated I was because I wasn't able to find the document I needed. Well, ah, the next day, a CS agent sent me the URL for the information and then called to apologize for me not being able to find it. I couldn't believe it. ... I was really surprised to get that call.

It's lots quicker to send an email and they [Cisco] always call you back.

Sometimes the customer's voice experience is enhanced because of the human response via telephone after an initially mediated message.

One customer was impressed when he made a suggestion by email and received a follow-up telephone call seeking clarification.

Some interview respondents chose to deal with a re-seller of Cisco products so that they could use the intermediary to trouble-shoot problems or present ideas. Consistent with other qualitative research (see Zeithami, et. al., 2002), the most technically adept customers choose the web-based channels over the person-to-person, whereas those without much technical background prefer to talk to a representative.

### **Customer Voice Contingencies**

Customer service activities can be seen by communication scholars as communication structures that can either encourage or constrain customer “voice.” We found several ways in which this might occur.

1. Listening/Attentiveness. To encourage voice, the CSR has to understand the problem the customer is experiencing. This can only be accomplished by careful listening in the person-to-person telephonic situation, or by careful attentiveness when the customer service environment is computer mediated. The CSR communicates that the customer is being listened to in his/her voice, her choice of words, and the way silences are handled. Customer listening can take priority over doggedly enforcing policy:

I am not a small little customer there. You see, but uh, we send in all the way south. ...That's not right. I understand when a board has been altered. That I understand, but this one, like the one I have in my hand, maybe I will give it to you, and you won't find what they found. Okay?

When there is a dispute about a defective part, in our disk-manufacturer case, the CSR has the authority to accept it back for inspection just to defuse the situation, but sometimes did not initiate that option even when the customer threatened exit. This may have been a failure to listen carefully.

Similarly, a customer might experience a lack of attentiveness from the CSR in the computer mediated experience, in exchanging emails

perhaps. One customer said, "There was this one time where the service guy didn't even read my email all the way through." Two email responses were received that were unresponsive to the message the customer had sent because the CSR had only bothered to look at the bottom half of the message. Attentiveness is critical to encouraging voice.

Related communication practices that enhance voice that we observed might include a CSR's seeking opportunities to shift from divergent to convergent goal seeking as discussed above. This should increase attentiveness and create a spirit of cooperation.

2. Access to Management. Hirschman's (1970) original conception of voice was that a person would complain so that management could rectify a bad situation and improve quality. This can hardly be done if the customer support process itself does not allow this to happen. The following is another part of the conversation about a damaged disk drive that was introduced above.

C: Okay, is, is there any way our customer can call you about this because he is pretty angry because you guys should really make the drives so the screws can be put in...

R: Well, actually the drives, uh, have specifications that the screw lengths are specified.

C: Well, they don't come that way from your distributor.

R: Uhm, actually, I, I couldn't there really isn't anybody else to talk to but the manager and I, I know what her explanation is going to be but certainly, I can give you her name at the, at the, you know. It's either that or Tech support.

At this point in the conversation, the CSR is struggling with fluency. In doing so, he resists allowing the customer to escalate the complaint. Another orientation would be to encourage the CSR's to be customer advocates to help them get the message to the very people who can resolve the situation, and even change the company's policies when needed. Then the conversation would be characterized by convergent goal seeking.

3. Service Policy. Sometimes the service policies are unreasonable or unwise. In the above example there is a lot of tension around the

fact that a screw has damaged the disk. In fact, this problem was an ongoing source of problems with customers because there was a propensity for the drives to be damaged by this "industry standard" screw. An engineering solution was clearly called for but would be initiated as a result of customer voice. In the meantime, a service policy kept the customer at bay.

4. Technical Challenges. In a CMC environment, technical limitations can constrain voice. A customer may have to work too hard to get web access. The software might send his/her email message to an out-of-date address. The sophistication of the company's software might create messages that the customer's equipment is not advanced enough to retrieve, or the web-site might be difficult to navigate or confusing. We found instances of all of these problems. The "click to talk" button is strategically placed on just certain web-pages, but if the web design is too stingy with how many are placed, customer voice is constrained. Sometimes the "click to talk" button cannot negotiate its way around telephone extensions. When this happens the customer has to be persistent to be heard.

The quality of the web-site affects the opportunity for voice. A review of the existing literature shows that web-site design impacts the quality of customer service and calls for additional research to understand this more fully (Zeithami, et. al., 2002). There have been other calls for the systematic study of web-site design as well (Nel, 1999). Intelligence, and therefore, systematic research about the way web-site design affects communication is sorely needed.

5. Customer's level of technical knowledge/comfort. Some customers were very explicit about why they make limited use of the CMC customer support system at Cisco:

Hell, I can't even tell you what some interface can or can't do. I don't know, and I don't care. Just fix my problem and make the network run is sort of my mentality.

The Cisco customer support site is more technical than most, but then most of its customers are engineers who express appreciation for the technical information that they are given access to the site. The

customer service environment has to be able to adjust the message to the varying levels of technical sophistication among its customers. This is a constant challenge, but it is at the heart of applied communication theory.

6. Degree of follow-up or action from representative. After a telephone conversation and two emails, nothing happened for one customer. "After a few weeks, I called him on the phone and asked what the update was. He had no clue what I was talking about." It is in the nature of the CSR's work to deal with a lot of customers. It is easy to over promise and to forget about commitments made. Aids to memory are important and can help with follow through. There may be nothing more deleterious to a customer's sense that he has no real voice than to be ignored.

In sum, organizational communication practices can be changed to enhance, rather than constrain customer voice. These six contingencies are probably not exhaustive, but they represent the recurring issues experienced in the two organizations we studied.

### **Customer Loyalty Contingencies**

The quality of communication in customer service affects customer loyalty and organizational vitality. This is the kernel of the argument in favor of enhancing customer voice. So, the first contingency of customer loyalty that we mention is the potential for customer voice which has just been discussed. Organizational structures, the facility of the communication channels being used, and the representative's communication behavior are of key importance in providing for customer voice. Adjustments that increase voice can both satisfy the customer and adapt the organization to provide higher quality products or services, which can make the organization more viable. This has been demonstrated in a study of customer attitudes. Ford (2003) created a statistical model that showed that communication performance of customer support personnel is correlated with customer satisfaction, which, in turn is predictive of predispositions toward customer loyalty.

Sometimes loyalty follows, not from enhancing voice or improving quality, but because of barriers to exit. Some of our respondents felt that there was no effective competition to Cisco, no better alternatives available to them. Others were not willing to write-off the "cost of entry" to becoming a Cisco customer. One of our respondents explained it this way:

Do you know how much money I have invested in these boxes? Think 1.3 million dollars. It would take a whole lot of bad things to happen for me to leave Cisco.

Because the marketplace is dynamic, most firms will not find it advisable to rely solely on barriers to exit to assure loyalty. Attention to voice is usually preferable.

The perceived quality of the company's product or service is also a contingency to customer loyalty. An impressive number of Cisco customers extolled the company's virtues. In this vein, we should complete our discussion of the way loyalty is built by noting the often perplexing division between perception and performance. First impressions linger. One of our respondents felt that Cisco always listened and could almost do no wrong. In the course of the conversation, however, two instances of support technology failure surfaced. The respondent discounted and glossed over both instances. Another customer pegged Cisco as one of the big companies that does not have to take care of customers. "Oh, Cisco doesn't know. They don't listen. Never have, never will." Similarly, a majority of our respondents indicated they knew Cisco listened because they always received an auto reply via email any time they submitted a complaint. Auto replies are automatic, after all. They require no effort on the part of customer service employees, or for that matter, anyone else at Cisco. Most of these users have a high degree of technical and mechanical aptitude. They know how it works, but they still consider auto-reply an indicator that Cisco listens. Also, Cisco changes its web-site regularly. Many users who have made general suggestions like, "Make the site easier to navigate" or "Make the search engine more intelligent," believe that changes in the site are evidence that Cisco is being responsive to them.

Thus customer loyalty is based not only on the perceived quality of the product or service being offered, but also on the quality of communication in the customer service context, perceived barriers to customer exit, and perceptions of organizational responsiveness to voice.

### Summary

In conclusion, customer service requires effective applied communication. With respect to this effectiveness, customer voice is important because of its connection to customer loyalty and organizational viability. At least three levels of analysis can help explain how voice functions in telephone conversations: conversation type, thematic cycles, and paired utterances (revealing goal orientation). Voice seems to occur in a CMC environment if there is opportunity for various types of synchronous and asynchronous messages, and it might be enhanced by studying its contingencies. If principles of organizational communication are applied, managers can better understand, evaluate, and enhance customer service activities.

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