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Management Communication Quarterly 2001; 14; 659

DOI: 10.1177/0893318901144010

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IS THIS A REAL PERSON?

Communication and Customer
Service in E-Commerce

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Much customer service research seems to have been conducted from the assumption that customer service is face-to-face interpersonal interaction between “real people,” that is, providers and customers. From their examination of a fragmented multidisciplinary research base, communication scholars Ford and Etienne (1994) proposed a simple framework for work on customer service centered on a list of types of customer service behaviors performed by providers. Their classification of types of customer service behaviors (courteous, personalized, manipulative) did not inherently limit customer service to face-to-face interpersonal interaction. However, although Ford and Etienne offered no definition of customer service, their focus on behaviors clearly implied that customer service is a *service encounter*, or “the dyadic interaction between a customer and a service provider” (Suprenant & Solomon, 1987, p. 87). The implications of the dyadic interaction assumption become particularly problematic in the e-commerce environment.

Customer service in an e-commerce environment includes an array of self-service and e-service technologies that challenge the assumption of dyadic interaction. As e-commerce develops, the

AUTHOR'S NOTE: The author would like to thank Dr. Michael Kramer, University of Missouri–Columbia, and Dr. Steve May, Management Communication Quarterly Forum Editor, for their helpful comments on earlier drafts of this article. Diane Tobin Johnson can be contacted regarding this article at Missouri Small Business Development Centers, University of Missouri, 1205 University Place, Suite 300, Columbia, MO 65211. Alternatively, she can be contacted via email at dej5ea@mizzou.edu.

Management Communication Quarterly, Vol. 14, No. 4, May 2001 659-665
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gap may widen between the way businesses conceive of customer service and the way communication scholars address it. Businesses already choose from a bewildering assortment of customer service options, including Web-based customer interaction (WCI), e-centers (Web-enabled call centers), virtual customer service representatives (e.g., the “NowReps” employed by eSupportNow), and e-customer relationship management (or e-CRM, such as services available from rightnowtech.com), among others.¹ An unnecessarily limited definition of customer service offers little help to businesses struggling to understand conceptual as well as bottom line differences. The need to reexamine this implied definition is not a matter of bending communication scholarship to make it work in the practical world. It is a matter of working conscientiously between communication theories and cogent observations to build a robust definition.

Customer service in the e-commerce world provides one playing field where that work can be done. Consider Sara, an imaginary young woman who has had some experiences with a software company. First, the company asked her to participate in a focus group to determine customers’ needs and preferences for word processing programs. She discussed her preferences with other young women over cappuccino and biscotti and filled out a brief demographic survey, including her e-mail address. About a month later, the company used a relationship management database to identify Sara, then sent her a personalized e-mail that included a Universal Resource Locator (URL) from which a sample of the revised software could be downloaded. Sara liked the free sample so she used the online order form to order the software. She specified the options she wanted and paid with a credit card. About 30 minutes later, she received an e-mail acknowledging her order and advising her of the software delivery date. When she received the software, she read the simple instructions, popped the CD-ROM into her computer, and responded as she was prompted to complete installation of the software. Over the next few days, the software adapted to Sara’s patterns of use. For example, it noted the words that she typically misspelled and automatically corrected as she typed. When Sara needed to send a document to a colleague in Madrid, she con-

sulted her “help” screen and was automatically connected with the company’s Web site to translate the document. In the middle of translating, the program crashed. Sara consulted the product documentation and called a toll-free, 24-hour help desk. An automated answering system asked her to key in her product license number and to choose from a menu of possible problems. Finally, Sara spoke with a technician, who accessed her product record and her online transaction to help her complete the translation.

When does customer service occur in this scenario? The company would insist that customer service is implemented in all of the steps above. In business marketing texts, customer service is discussed as a strategy to support perceptions and sales of product. Critical elements in this strategy have been identified as the mix of customer service, the level of customer service, and the forms of customer service (Kotler & Armstrong, 1989). So business can discuss each of Sara’s experiences as customer service.

If the definition of customer service is limited to dyadic interaction, or even interaction, between provider and customer, one cannot address some elements of Sara’s experience. A dyad is defined as “two people engaged in face-to-face interaction” (Sullivan, Hartley, Saunders, Montgomery, & Fiske, 1994, p. 98). Sara’s talk with the company technician is interactive, but it is mediated, not face-to-face. Sara’s interaction with the focus group is not dyadic, although it too is interactive. Does customer service have to be dyadic? And what about the term *interaction*? Does the reciprocity involved in interaction have to occur in shared time and space? The definition of customer service becomes problematic long before the introduction of e-commerce elements.

E-commerce pushes those definitional problems further, because it can involve self-service technologies (SSTs) as well as direct employee interactions. Sara used SSTs to acquire both a product and a service without interacting directly with an employee (Meuter, Ostrom, Roundtree, & Bitner, 2000). SSTs include relatively simple service encounters, such as using an Automated Teller Machine (ATM), an “express checkout” option via the television screen in a hotel room, or a self-scanning checkout lane in a grocery store. Increasingly, businesses have adopted more sophisti-

cated SSTs to improve responsiveness to customers. These sophisticated SSTs include encounters in which products continue to adapt to customer needs and preferences past the point of acquisition, virtual encounters with customer service representatives, and “just-in-time” online training/learning encounters. Unlike their brick-and-mortar business colleagues, who have learned that emphasizing interpersonal aspects of service translates into increased customer and employee loyalty and profitable word-of-mouth advertising (e.g., Reynolds & Beatty, 1999), e-business managers have little communication research to consult. This lack of research is not inevitable. It is simply an artifact of the recency of e-commerce phenomena and of unexamined definitions in previous research, not a limitation inherent in communication theory.

New technologies typically include the intentional production, reception, and interpretation of symbolic social codes (Trenholm, 1986). However, when the providers of social symbolic codes are removed in time and space from customers receiving those codes, important questions arise concerning human agency (Anderson, 1996). It may be useful to conceptualize service technologies on a continuum. At one end of the continuum, a provider has no agency and, thus, little ability to be flexible—for example, placing a washer (a service technology) in a laundromat. In taking this action, the provider makes some projections about how people may use the technology. The machine provides a service but few adjustments can be made. Agency is extremely limited.

In contrast, establishing an online tool for building a Web site would be somewhere past the midpoint of the continuum. As in the previous example, the provider makes some projections about how people may use the tool. However, in this case, the provider continues to observe patterns of use and make adjustments in the technology, increasing options available to the customer and increasing the responsiveness of the product. The provider may or may not engage in real-time interaction with a given customer. Both the customer and the provider have limited alternative responses available. Their agency is limited, but the provider of the Web-building tool is more responsive than the provider of the washer.

As e-commerce moves further toward real-time service products (Rust & Oliver, 2000), technology will help providers and customers become more and more flexible, increasing their agency. The projected far end of the continuum may involve a complex mix of real-time and preprogrammed responses used by both customers and providers. For example, customers may order goods and services using their own preprogrammed order parameters via e-mail, with a trigger to begin interacting in real-time if certain code words occur in the provider's response, such as "out of stock." Providers may "see" customers' electronic footsteps through a Web site and respond in real time when those footsteps hesitate or linger. It is impossible to know precisely what technology may offer in the next several years, but it is possible to say that agency may be an important concept in working toward new definitions of customer service.

Another concept for building new conceptualizations of customer service has been introduced by Gutek and Welsh (2000), who distinguished types of service events. These authors would define Sara's interaction with the support technician as a service *encounter* because Sara dealt with a stranger whose behavior was controlled to a greater or lesser extent by organizational policies and procedures. If Sara's customer service event had been a service *relationship*, she would have been communicating with an independent practitioner. This technical adviser and Sara would have accumulated knowledge about each other as the result of repeated interactions. The critical element in Gutek and Welsh's definition of service is "who people are to each other" over time. Whether they occupy shared time and space in any given service event is less important. The service relationship would still be a relationship if the two of them were communicating over the telephone or online.

If the assumption that real customers and providers exist only in shared time and/or space remains unexamined, the gap will widen between business conceptions of customer service and communication scholarship, to the detriment of both. Degrees of human agency (Anderson, 1996) and distinctions between service encounters and relationships (Gutek & Welsh, 2000) are two of many con-

ceptual tools available to scholars interested in expanding definitions of customer service.

NOTE

1. Web-based customer interaction currently uses four primary technologies: e-mail responses, chat rooms, Web collaboration, and voice-over IP responses. For example, many Web pages now feature a button that allows the viewer to interact directly with someone at the Web site. Web-enabled call centers (e-centers) typically use e-mail management systems; language recognition programs analyze incoming e-mail to route it efficiently to the correct customer service agent. Or, e-mail inquiries may trigger a preformulated message response. NowReps are customer service representatives employed by a company called eSupportNow to handle customer service functions outsourced by client companies, including initiating chat, closing sales, and responding to e-mail inquiries. E-CRM uses the Internet and company intranets to access multiple sources of information and provide time-critical information to key decision makers so that they can anticipate customer questions and forestall complaints, sometimes by proactively initiating contact with customers.

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