THE ROLE OF LISTENING IN E-CONTACT CENTER: INVESTIGATION FOR CRM OUTCOMES IN RETAILING SETTINGS

JungKun Park, University of Houston, USA
Te-Lin Chung, Purdue University, USA
Brian Rutherford, Purdue University, USA

ABSTRACT

As a part of the e-commerce transformation, contact centers have transformed to e-contact centers and offer more various channels for consumers to access. E-contact centers are now at the frontline to deal with not only the complaints but also requisitions of information about product information or order status instead of being a back supportive office (Anton, 2000). This transformation has also made it possible to guide different segment of consumers and making marketing more cost effective and efficient (Myers et al., 2004), and increased the value delivered to the consumers. However, companies are also facing issues of more effective management and service quality (Hart et al., 2006) while they invite more consumer-contacts through various channels in e-contact centers. Thus, managing service quality so as to maintain consumers' experiences is likely to have important implications for e-contact center success. Active empathetic listening (AEL) (Comer and Drollinger, 1999) have been supported with its important role between salespeople and customers (Comer and Drollinger, 1999; Drollinger et al., 2006), and provide this current study a theoretical framework of employee behavior. The purpose of this study is, first, to examine the effects of AEL on interpersonal service quality in e-contact center context and, second, to investigate the role of interpersonal service quality in building up customer relationship, specifically to scrutinize the relation between interpersonal service quality and perceived value, satisfaction, and loyalty.

The role of listening is considered crucial in business to consumer communication (Ramsey and Sohi, 1997; Drollinger et al., 2006). Instead of regarding listening as a physical internal process of hearing of spoken message and understanding the meaning (Goss, 1982), de Ruyter and Wetzels (2000) suggested listening a behavior that consists of affective and cognitive activities and thus could be perceived by others. Drollinger (1999) incorporated the three facets of listening (namely, sensing, evaluating, and responding) with empathy and redefined active listening as active empathy listening (AEL) as "a process in which the listener receives messages, processes them, and responds, so as to encourage further communication" (Comer and Drollinger, 1999). As AEL allows the contact center representatives to approach customers' utilitarian needs on a deeper level; it is very likely that consumers' utilitarian value would increase as well. Thus, this study hypothesized that e-listening is related to both interpersonal service quality and perceived value. Several studies have also shown that interpersonal service quality has an effect on consumers' satisfaction and purchase intention in online retailing context where the consumers don't have actual interaction with the salespersons (e.g. Grewal et al., 2003; Kim and Niehm, 2009). It is possible that interpersonal service quality is related to other customer relationship outcomes, namely, perceived value, satisfaction, and loyalty.

An online survey was conducted to a national panel purchased from an independent online research company. Two hundred and ten usable responses were collected. The measures in this study were adopted from previous studies. Confirmatary factor analysis and structural equation modeling were used to analyzed the collected data. The results confirm that e-listening is highly related with interpersonal service quality and utilitarian value. In traditional face-to-face customer-company interactions, active listening has been playing an important role on generating customer satisfaction (Ramsey and Sohi, 1997; Castleberry and Shepherd, 1993). The results of this study indicated that when the interactions take place through an untraditional channel, active "listening" with representatives' empathy would increase consumers' perceived service quality as well as the utilitarian value delivered by the e-contact center service. The result for the interrelationships of customer relationship outcomes is consistent with previous studies (e.g. Cronin et al., 2000; Harris et al., 2006). Interpersonal service quality is positively related to satisfactions with e-contact center and e-retailer; utilitarian value is positively related to satisfaction with e-contact center; and satisfaction with e-retailers is positively related to consumers' loyalty. This study provides an additional evidence for the argument that value and quality lead to satisfaction and consequently lead to consumers' loyalty.

The study suggests several implications. First, this study indicated that e-listening is a possible way to enhance consumers' perceived interpersonal service quality and utilitarian value on the e-contact center and to make e-contact center an effective tool to build customer-company relationships. Second, this study extends the understanding of the interrelationship of value, quality, satisfaction and loyalty, and respond to the study of Park et al. (in press) which also examine the interrelationship in e-contact center but focused on social aspect.
References available upon request