Hed: Are You Speaking to Your Customers the Right Way?

Should a customer service agent say, "We want to help you" or "I want to help you"? The choice influences customer satisfaction — and the bottom line.

By Brent McFerran, Sarah G. Moore and Grant Packard

More and more consumers are engaging with customer service through digital channels including websites, email, texts, live chat, or social media. Only half of customer experiences with firms involved face-to-face or voice-based interactions in 2017, and digital interactions are expected to represent two-thirds of customer experiences by 2022.[1]

Despite the convenience and speed of these interactions, they lack some of the most important aspects of offline customer service. In-person interactions are rich in nonverbal expressions and gestures, which can signal deep engagement, and an agent's tone of voice can convey empathy and focus in phone conversations. Over time, these interpersonal touches help companies build and sustain relationships with customers.

But can *some* of that benefit be captured in the world of digital customer service? We argue that it can—with the right words. Our focus on words is consistent with a growing recognition among businesses that language matters, digitally or otherwise. Apple, for example, has explicit policies detailing which words can (and cannot) be used, and how they should be used when interacting with customers.[3] The use of customer service scripts is also commonplace in service contexts, where employees are encouraged to use specific words when interacting with customers.[4]

However, we find that most companies are taking a misguided approach in their emails, texts, and social media communications with customers. They're using words that, while designed to engage customers, can sometimes alienate them.

Our research[5] focuses on personal pronouns (*I, we, you*), which psychologists have linked to critical personal and social outcomes.[6] Customer service agents use personal pronouns in nearly every sentence they utter, whether it's "We're happy to help you" or "I think we do have something in your size." Our research shows that simple shifts in employee language can enhance customer satisfaction and purchase behavior.

The Power of Pronouns

Conventional wisdom says that being "customer oriented" is critical to customer satisfaction. That's why phrases like "We're happy to help you" have become so popular in service settings. Agents are often taught to lean on the pronoun "you" and to avoid saying "I," and our survey of

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over 500 customer service managers and employees shows that they've taken those prescriptions to heart. [See About the Research.]

Our results reveal that service employees not only believe they should but actually do frequently refer to the customer as "you" and to the company as "we," and they tend to leave themselves as individuals (the "I") out of the conversation. What's more, when we compared service agent pronoun use with natural English-language base rates, we found that employees are using far more "we" and "you" pronouns in service settings than people do in almost any other context. Customer service language seems to have evolved into its own kind of discourse.

To find out if this discourse is optimal, we took a subset of the customer service responses we had collected, which showed high use of "we" pronouns, and constructed alternative responses, replacing "we" with "I." For example, "*We* are happy to help" easily became "*I* am happy to help" without changing the basic message. We also removed references to the customer in some responses. For example, "How do the shoes fit *you*?" became "How do the shoes fit?" We then randomly assigned individuals to read either the company's response or our edited response and assessed their satisfaction with the company and the agent, as well as their purchase intentions.

We found some surprising results that are inconsistent with current approaches.

Using "I" Conveys Empathy and Action

In all cases, our modified responses with "I" pronouns significantly outperformed the "we" pronouns that real service agents were using. Relative to using "we", the benefit of using "I" stemmed from the fact that customers perceived the employee to be (a) more empathetic and (b) more agentic, or acting on the customer's behalf.

We also examined these language features in a large dataset of more than 1,000 customer service email interactions from a large multinational retailer of entertainment and information products. We matched these email interactions with customer purchase data. Econometric analyses revealed the same positive results of using "I" pronouns: A 10% increase in "I" pronoun use by company agents corresponded to a 0.8% increase in customer purchase volume after controlling for other factors. Our analysis suggests that companies could achieve an incremental sales lift of more than 5%, and still fall within natural language norms, by increasing their service agents' use of "I" pronouns where possible.

Why is "I" a more powerful pronoun in agents' interactions? After all, saying "I" too much can signal self-centeredness,[7] and many leaders are, in fact, criticized for speaking too much about themselves.

However, CEO speeches and corporate earnings reports are not one-on-one interactions, which, as linguists point out, can see the opposite effect:[8] When two people are communicating, "I" suggests a personal focus on the issue at hand. Specifically, our research on

customer service finds that saying "I" signals that the agent is feeling and acting on the customer's behalf. For example, telling a customer "*I* am working on that" conveys a greater sense of ownership than "*We* are working on that," which can imply a diffusion of responsibility. Similarly, "*I* understand the issue" shows more empathy than "*We* understand the issue."

Ultimately, customers need to know that the agents with whom they are interacting care and are working on their behalf. Research has shown that customer perceptions of empathy and agency drive satisfaction and purchase intentions,[9] and our studies show that "I" fosters these perceptions to a significantly greater degree than "we."

Using "You" Can Backfire

While "I" is clearly better than "we" when referring to who is providing service, what about using the word "you"? Our studies suggest that service managers and employees believe "you" conveys a customer orientation. We also found that agents use it more frequently than natural language would warrant. [5]

However, peppering conversations with "you" offers little benefit, because customers are already the implied focus of these interactions. In fact, adding or removing references to "you" (the customer) tended to have no positive effect in our studies. We replicated these results across a total of nine experiments (over 1,200 participants total, about 55% female, 45% male) using a variety of language stimuli covering a range of typical customer service interactions. In our studies, the use of "you" to refer to the customer as the recipient of the agent's actions such as "I can look that up for *you*," did nothing to improve satisfaction, purchase intentions, or customer feelings that the agent was acting with either empathy or agency.

Sometimes, using the word "you" can actually have a negative impact on company and customer outcomes. For example, we found that saying to a customer, "Sorry *your* product was defective" rather than "Sorry *the* product was defective," resulted in decreased satisfaction and purchase intentions. This result was driven in part by perceptions that the employee wasn't being accountable (agency), potentially shifting the responsibility or blame towards the customer.

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In short, the usual prescriptions and practices of referring to the company as "we" and emphasizing "you," the customer, fail to reap the benefits that managers expect. It's more effective when agents speak from a personal, singular perspective — treating customer interactions as one-to-one, rather than many-to-one, dialogues. So front-line service employees should be coached to do that. There are simple language changes that any company can implement. (See "Recommended Pronoun Use in Customer Service Interactions.") By making

these changes to customer service language, organizations can create more meaningful interactions with their customers — and improve the bottom line.

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[About the Research] [box]
Our research looks at language in digital customer service interactions. To test conventional wisdom and practices regarding the use of personal pronouns in text-based exchanges, we surveyed over 500 customer service managers or agents, analyzed over 1,000 customer service emails from 41 of the top 100 global online retailers, and conducted controlled experiments with 2,819 North American adult participants in an online panel including managers, agents, and general population consumers, and lab experiments with undergraduate students.

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[Chart]
RECOMMENDED PRONOUN USE IN CUSTOMER SERVICE INTERACTIONS
Customer service agents tend to use the "we" pronoun, but using "I" pronouns actually leads to greater customer satisfaction and an increase in purchases.

How agents typically speak to customers:	A better approach:
We're happy to help!	**I'm** happy to help!
No problem, **we** can find that.	No problem**, I** can find that.
What **we** can offer today is…	What **I** can offer today is…
Our manager is on the way.	**My** manager is on the way.
Let **us** get back to you on that.	Let **me** get back to you on that.

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