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Customer Service Challenges in Omni-Channel Retailing—An Exploratory Study of Vague Language in Retailer Customer Service Policies

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Abstract - Retailers are interacting with customers via an ever-increasing number of touchpoints. The addition of social media and mobile devices to the traditional physical and virtual retail platforms has created an evolving consumer practice of using several such "touchpoints" in the course of a single purchase (the "omni-channel"). The difficulty of providing high levels of customer service has increased with the necessity of managing multiple channels under the retailer's control and coordinating formally or informally with touchpoints not directly within the retailer's own operations. Multiple sources of potentially conflicting information (e.g., order fulfillment) can lead to miscommunication, and thus poor service experience for customers. The purpose of this paper is to describe two preliminary studies that explore how well retailers are prepared for this increasing complexity via a content analysis of retailer website language regarding customer service policies. Implications of our findings and recommendations for further research are then discussed.

Keywords - omni-channel, multichannel, marketing channels, service, customer service, communication, miscommunication

Introduction

The practice of marketing has been both enhanced and made more challenging by the introduction of additional channel options and interaction with customers. Retailers have handled multichannel operations for many years, mostly involving coordinating their brick and mortar, catalog, and on-line businesses, always seeking to provide customer value (Kim and Lee, 2014, Lin, 2012). Specialty channels, such as vending and direct sales, are additional options in some retail sectors. Terms being used regarding such options and practices include "channel integration" (Tyrväinen and Karjaluoto, 2019), "partnered hybrid offerings" (Becerril-Arreola et al., 2017), "the sharing economy" (Ferrell et al., 2017), and "channel disruption" (Crittenden et al. 2017).

Besides traditional channel options, the past decade has seen the creation of numerous social media entities and practices. Retailers have experimented with various ways to fold these methods of direct customer interaction into their existing operations, leading to an explosion of studies aimed at exploring and explaining various practices that incorporate the myriad options to best effect (Kang, 2018; Frederick, Lim, and Winkenbach, 2019; Kaczorowska-Spychalska, 2017; Piotrowicz and Cuthbertson, 2014; Verhoef et al, 2015). Marketing scholars have begun seeking to codify the rich production of practices to achieve better understanding and cohesion within the retail industry and more broadly in marketing channels and supply chain management. The *International Journal of Electronic Commerce* published a special issue on omni-channel marketing in 2014 and the *Journal of Retailing* followed with a special multi-/omni- channel

issue in 2015. The American Marketing Association identified the omni-channel as one of six "Big Problems" of marketing practice featured for the 2016 AMA Summer Educators Conference. The research opportunities remain at the forefront for marketers, with the *Journal of Marketing Channels* special issue on the sharing economy in 2017 and an *International Journal of Physical Distribution & Logistics Management* special issue appearing in 2018. Other scholars have described a need for omni-channel related research. Kozlenkova et al. (2015) in their meta-analysis of supply chain management and marketing channels, include several takeaways that directly relate to marketers trying to understand and manage omni-channel environments (e.g., Takeaway #1, interdisciplinary elements, Takeaway #3, constructs across multiple channels, and Takeaway #10, process inputs into marketing functions, including communications). Finally, one of the leading marketing channels textbooks has recently codified the trend in its most recent edition (Palmatier et al., 2019).

We can see that the omni-channel trend is well-recognized, and research providing descriptions of various ways marketers are bringing the pieces together is underway. However, the time is at hand to begin capturing evidence of actual managerial decisions and policies related to omni-channel implementation and the challenges involved in achieving the promise of multiple touchpoints adding value instead of taking it away. Our purpose in this paper is to explore how inadvertent retailer miscommunication could lead to less-than-desirable customer service outcomes across touchpoints. After a preliminary examination of retailer website content, via two exploratory content analyses of customer service language, we then suggest avenues for further research on communication between and among channel partners and other omnichannel players.

Miscommunication in Customer Service

Keeping integrated marketing communication truly integrated has always been a challenge for marketers. With the rise of the omni-channel, the number of potential sources of information expands the number of potential cases of misunderstanding and miscommunication. One of the most important factors for online customers is order fulfillment, especially regarding how much time from order placement to receipt will be involved, without paying for expedited delivery (Fisher, Gallino, and Xu, 2019; *Internet Retailer,* 2016).

Retailers have had enough problems communicating accurately with operations directly under their control. When heading into omni-channel efforts while relying on the promises of partners not under their direct control, the communication challenges can become unmanageable (Perrigot et al. 2013, Allon and Bassamboo, 2011, Kull et al. 2010). For example, Dick's Sporting Goods switched its online order fulfillment from third party vendors to an in-house model in part because of difficulties with inventory levels reported online not matching what it actually had available for its customers (*TechRepublic*, 2016). Such difficulties are not limited to product-related sectors of retailing. Below is a customer anecdote regarding his experience with miscommunication in a services retail setting:

> *Prior to our wedding, my wife and I decided that we wanted to honeymoon in Jamaica. We are members of the Hilton Honors rewards program, and knew that we wanted to book an all-inclusive resort with Hilton so that we could build up extra points from purchasing the stay at the Hilton resort. We found a Hilton resort in Jamaica and decided it would be perfect for our trip. We went online to Hilton's website and clicked a*

link to book the trip. What we failed to notice is that the link that the Hilton website provided for booking the trip, actually took us to an Expedia-type website for bundling the trip with airfare. We just assumed that because we used Hilton's website and were Hilton Honors members that the reward points would be credited to our account. However, that was not the case. Time passed and we began to wonder why we hadn't yet received our rewards points. After a call with Hilton's customer service, we finally straightened out the miscommunication and explained that we had used a link on their website to book the trip and that we were under the impression that meant we were booking the trip through their company and it would qualify for the points. The Hilton customer service person said they did not realize that this link existed. Luckily for us, their customer service department was more than happy to work with us and credit our account with the points. We were very fortunate, but we also learned our lesson. We now know the importance of communicating, especially on larger transactions, such as the Hilton resort stay, and would now be sure to call in to customer service and get all of the details before booking.

Noteworthy is the fact that Hilton *did not know that their own site linked to an external site*. As with the Dick's Sporting Goods inventory example and the French franchisees described by Perrigot et al. (2013), this is a case of having multiple touchpoints but not having mechanisms in place to ensure uniform information is being provided. This omni-channel issue magnifies the failure in communication that occurs regularly even on a one-to-one basis. Insight from studies of miscommunication might prove useful as a remedy for some of the communication problems that arise within omni-channel interactions. One such avenue of research forms the basis of our investigation into miscommunication within omni-channel settings. We will briefly describe this research approach and then discuss the two exploratory studies we conducted for this article that are based on it.

Brewer and Holmes (2009, 2016) have highlighted how differences in meaning placed on commonly used terms can exacerbate miscommunication between individuals or within a group. For example, when a customer service representative states that a customer can "probably" expect to pick up a special order at the end of the week because such orders are "usually" filled and shipped within 2-6 days, he or she may have a different meaning in mind for "probably" and "usually" than the customer does. Indeed, this miscommunication research finds a wide range of meaning for these two (and other) probability-oriented terms, and also for other commonly used terms that refer to lengths of time, such as "soon" or "right away" (Brewer and Holmes, 2009). For example, the meaning for "usually" can range from a percentage in the 60s all the way to absolute certainty of 100%, and "soon" can range from a time frame measured in hours to one measured in *months!* (Brewer and Holmes, 2016).

When such miscommunication over time can exist between *one* customer and *one* touchpoint (the retailer customer service representative), imagine the potential difficulty when bringing into play *multiple* touchpoints for a single transaction. Retailers that have customers interacting via the retailer's Facebook page, its in-store customer service operation, and the retail website may end up making assurances based on conflicting meaning and thus cause confusion and discontent among its customers. The bottom line is that a shared understanding of time and probability is extremely important for reducing miscommunication in traditional customer service situations, and likely more so in omni-channel settings.

Study 1

We first set out to explore whether retailers are in fact using vague language in their communication with customers. Our purpose in this preliminary study is simple—we want to explore how well retailers are prepared for the increasing complexity of an omni-channel environment via a content analysis of retailer website language regarding customer service elements. Thus, our research question for Study 1 is:

Research Question: Do retailers set clear expectations for customers regarding order delivery times?

Methodology

To begin our exploratory investigation into potential miscommunication, we conducted a content analysis of the language retailers are using on the customer service pages of their customer-facing websites. For this initial look we chose to examine delivery time. We wanted to determine how clearly the length of time was presented on the site and also to see if the types of vague terms described by Brewer and Holmes were evident. Because we had discovered the Dick's Sporting Goods information, we chose the retail category of sporting goods and then randomly selected 32 retailers in that retail category for a content analysis of shipping information statements regarding time to delivery. We recorded the mean number of days to receipt (i.e., number of days between the order being placed on the website and the retailer's statement as to expected delivery to the customer's location) as stated in each retailer's shipping policy. All retailers listed a range of days within which customers could expect delivery, with the most common being from three days to one week. The range across all retailers in the sample was 2-12 days. The number of days to receipt is similar to what was found in a recent report regarding customer expectations (*Internet Retailer,* 2016).

For the vague language part of our analysis, each of the two authors read the shipping information content and recorded the types of terms Brewer and Holmes (2009, 2016) report that can cause miscommunication. We then compared notes from this content analysis and found agreement on the terms that the retailers used. About half of the 32 sporting goods retailers in our sample used one or more of the vague terms on their sites alongside the number of days to receipt. Table 1 lists examples of the specific language used. Retailers not included used the same, or very similar, vague terms.

Table 1: Study 1 Examples of Vague Terms in Shipping Information

Academy Sports and Outdoors	"Most items"
Bass Pro Shops	"Most packages"
Cabela's	"Normally"
Champs Sports	"After shipping"
Columbia Sportswear Co.	"May vary"
Marathon Sports	"Approximately"
Modell's	"Typically"
Outdoor Research	"As fast as we can"
Scheels	"Usually"

This preliminary finding is interesting because previous miscommunication research suggests such factors as multitasking and time pressure contribute to people using these common vague terms for probability and time (Brewer and Holmes, 2009). However, here *the terms are codified into the language the retailer has chosen, and supposedly edited, for customers to read to help clarify how long they can expect to wait for order delivery*. It is not clear if the terms used are *purposefully* aimed at creating uncertainty, although the miscommunication research cited above would predict that such uncertainty would be a likely outcome.

Regarding our research question for Study 1, our first look at sporting goods retailers suggests that a sizeable proportion of retailers are not setting clear expectations for customers regarding order delivery times. Given these findings, we set out to follow up and conduct a preliminary examination of additional retail categories and other customer service elements.

Study 2

For this study, we extended our research to examine delivery time information for four additional retail categories and added product return policy as a second customer service category. Our aim was to determine if the vague language found for sporting goods retailers was perhaps isolated to that type of store. For the same reason we wanted to explore the additional customer service element. Finally, we sought to obtain an early indication as to whether retailers with a reputation for good customer service are less prone to include such vague language on their websites, via their ratings on a third-party customer satisfaction index. Our research questions for Study 2 are:

Research Question 1: Do retailers in multiple retail sectors set clear expectations for customers regarding order delivery times and return policies?

Research Question 2: Do retailers with higher customer satisfaction ratings set clearer expectations for delivery and returns than do other retailers?

Methodology

Our second research question involved whether top customer service performers set clearer expectations for customer service (shipping information and return policy) than do retailers not as highly regarded for excellent service. For this preliminary look, we incorporated data from the American Customer Satisfaction Index (ACSI) both for examining customer satisfaction and for selecting our sample of retailers. ACSI is a national cross-industry measure of customer satisfaction (http://www.theacsi.org). We chose the retail categories of auto parts stores, department stores, and drugstores. We then selected three retailers in each category. However, there were far more retailers listed in the department store category than in the other categories. Also, stores such as Kohl's were listed in the category along with upscale retailers, such as Nordstrom. Thus, we decided to split the category into upscale department stores and more moderately positioned department stores. Given the preliminary nature of our research, we limited our website content analysis for this study to three retailers in each category. Finally, for comparison with the specialty retailers and department stores, we examined the delivery and return policies of the two largest retailers —Amazon and Walmart. As with Study 1, each author read through the policies, recorded examples of vague language on customer service website

pages, and compared and agreed on findings. Table 2 shows our findings regarding shipping, returns, and examples of vague language in columns 2-4.

Table 2

Category	Delivery	Return	Notes	ACSI '17	ACSI Industry Benchmark
Dept Store 1					77
Nordstrom	3 to 6	no limit	"do our best"	81	
Dillard	2 to 5	30 days	2 day processing time	79	
Macy's	3 to 6	180 days	"exceptions" for returns	77	
Dept Store 2					77
Belk	4 to 7	180 days	Very specific content; no vague language in shipping nor returns	77	
Kohl's	3 to 6	specifics	"Some" and "may" are used but otherwise only usual disclaimers	79	
JC Penney	3 to 5	not mentioned	Most, Usually, Some, Typically, and May are used in shipping pages Returns are specific and are specific to types of items.	79	(Specialty Retail)
Auto Parts					79
O'Reilly	3 to 5	no limit	"most" processed within 2 days	81	
AutoZone	3 to 5	not mentioned	2 day processing time, no direct link to customer service had to search	78	
Advance Auto	3 to 4	45 days	"Typically" "varies"	79	
Drugstore					79
CVS	5 to 10	60 days	"Might" Most" "Varies" and "Some" used in shipping pages	78	
Rite-Aid	3 to 5	90 days	Several disclaimers regarding when packages will arrive, "Generally" use	77	
Walgreens	1 to 3	30 days	Unwieldy navigation; must click on individual Qs within shipping pages to find answers; also wordy answer to "Total shipping time for my order."	77	
Amazon	4 to 5	30 days	Prime has 2 day shipping, 100m members in early 2018 "May" is used, but otherwise not much vague language "Usually" and "Most" used in return pages	85	
					71
Wal-Mart	2 day now free on some items shipping tmes shown during checkout	90 days	Return policies vary by department	75	

Next, we looked at ACSI's reported indicators for the retailers in our sample, and compared them with the ACSI benchmarks for the corresponding retail sector. As shown in columns 5 and 6 in Table 2, the ACSI ratings for the retailers in our sample do not vary much. For the only three with ratings above 80, Nordstrom (81) did have vague language on its site, with the example shown being that they would "do their best" to deliver within the 3 to 6 days stated in their shipping policy. As Nordstrom is legendary for high levels of customer service perhaps having "their best" as a promise carries more weight than it would for other retailers. Notable also is that Nordstrom had no limit regarding returns. O'Reilly Auto Parts (81), the highest-rated auto parts store in our sample, also used vague language ("most" orders processed within two days), but like Nordstrom, it had no time limit on returns. Finally, the highest ACSI rating in our sample belongs to Amazon at 85; and this in a sector (online retailing) with the lowest benchmark rating among the retail sectors represented in our sample. Amazon had limited vague language within shipping (where "may" was a common disclaimer) and additional vague terms in returns ("usually" and "most"). In our limited scope it is impossible to know whether Amazon's high ASCI rating is based on overall satisfaction, a halo effect from Prime members,

or some other source. It is also not clear that these retailers have fewer uses of vague language than the other retailers in our sample with lower ASCI ratings. Further research is needed here.

Results were very similar to the sporting goods retailers in the first study regarding the stated ranges for shipping time (for free standard shipping). Return polices varied widely, with two retailers having no time limit after purchase to make returns. This type of generous policy has recently come under pressure as some people (not always the original customer) have abused it by buying products at garage sales or thrift stores and then seeking a full-price refund at the original retailer. In early 2018 L.L.Bean, as one example, ended its long-standing policy of taking back merchandise whenever the customer desired, for whatever reason, and without need for a receipt. The most common time limit for returns was 30 days, with 90 days being the second most frequent.

As with the sporting goods retailers in Study 1, the language used by this set of retailers featured numerous uses of vague language in both the shipping and return website pages. As shown in the table, the language issue varied, *even within a particular retailer's sites*. For example, JC Penney had multiple terms in its shipping pages that are open to individual interpretation, such as "most," "usually," and "typically." However, this retailer had specific and detailed descriptions for returns, *including specific policies for certain items*.

Regarding the first research question for Study 2, our results show that there is a similar degree of vague language codified into these retailers' sites. The same type of language is also used regarding return policies. Thus, given results from our exploratory studies, there is at least an indication that the use of such language is common in customer-facing website content.

Discussion

The fulfillment landscape continues to evolve rapidly. In 2018 Walmart began featuring free two-day shipping on thousands of items, likely feeling the pressure of Amazon's ever-expanding presence, especially with its 100+ million Prime customers receiving two-day shipping at no additional cost (e.g., Walmart specifically states "no membership required"). Walmart also features specific shipping time information during the checkout process, an improvement over the standard terms that most retailers still feature. More recently, Walmart has begun rebranding its own membership program "Delivery Unlimited," which offers subscribers same-day delivery of groceries from select stores in the United States, as "Walmart+" (*Vox*, February 27, 2020). The retail giants continue to ramp up the pressure for ever faster delivery (*CNBC*, February 25, 2020). Smaller retailers who do not have the resources for such large-scale one- or two-day delivery programs (i.e., with their free standard shipping) must communicate clearly and deliver orders within the time promised.

Communicating with customers both before and after service encounters is important for achieving good customer service. However, with the omni-channel a proliferation of potential touchpoints has complicated the task for retailers. Setting expectations demands clear language so customers can make decisions based on retailer promises regarding various service tasks, such as shipping, returns, and product information. For example, in the well-known "Gaps Model" of customer service (Parasuraman, Zeithaml, & Berry 1985) the *communication gap* is based on how well the retailer has set expectations for its customers prior to their engaging in a transaction. After purchases are made, the customer can see how well the retailer has lived up to these prior promises. The retailer also has the opportunity to explain the service encounter afterward, detailing what was done and why. However, if it finds its "explanations" tend to be

mostly comprised of apologies, then the retailer has either failed to deliver what was promised or has been vague in stating those promises. Given our preliminary findings, retailers should seek to provide more exact language in stating policies that involve time. Package tracking links on customer service websites and mobile apps could help a great deal; customers can see that their deliveries are on the way, and thus some degree of certainty is achieved. Walmart's ordering process includes estimated time to delivery before the purchase is even completed, a concrete step that more retailers would be wise to adopt as competitive pressure to deliver rises.

Limitations and Future Research

Our preliminary look into miscommunication in customer service is just that, and thus has several weaknesses. First, for Study 1 we simply chose a retail category based on a particular case we became aware of (Dick's Sporting Goods), one that featured several characteristics we felt would make it a good first choice for studying an omni-channel environment. Selecting retail categories at random would of course be necessary in further research on omni-channel customer service. In our two exploratory studies, we simply wanted to get an idea as to whether vague language is "built in" to retailer-provided information. Given the overall findings from the two studies we are satisfied our choice sufficed to provide a good starting point for additional research. In Study 2 all three retail categories contained retailers with vague language appearing in customer-facing websites. Future researchers who choose to study channel, supply chain, outside-the-channel influencers, or customers will, of course, incorporate more proven participant selection methods.

To our knowledge, miscommunication has not been examined regarding the communication gap. Further work could seek to find out the intent of retailers regarding language used in various customer service touchpoints. Are they purposefully providing vague language to avoid being held to specific lengths of time? Surveying retailers regarding their measures of service quality, what types of training they provide for customer service personnel, and policies that provide these personnel the necessary authority to adapt to customer needs on the fly could shed light on sources of miscommunication and recovery from service failures that result from it. Interviewing customer service representatives regarding their communication practices with customers would be another avenue to pursue.

Researchers could create and test a conceptual model from either the customer's or the retailer's perspective. Perhaps the Gaps model of customer service (Parasuraman, Zeithaml, and Berry, 1985) could be used as a framework to study many omni-channel retail customer service approaches. How are retailers learning about their customers' expectations for service? How do they incorporate that knowledge into their service models? How do they instill the knowledge and intended service to provide in their service personnel? How do they communicate the service quality to be provided to ensure customer understanding? How do they disseminate their policies to channel and supply chain partners?

In addition to shipping-related services, researchers could extend this research to include other service functions, such as inventory monitoring, alternative channels, etc. Further study of Amazon's notably higher ASCI rating would be interesting as well. The company has many and varied omni-channel operations, including its recent emphasis on brick and mortar operations with the acquisition of Whole Foods and its continuing experiment with Amazon Go. Thus, it would be interesting to focus on this currently-largest retailer for further study of its communication practices.

Conclusion

The rise of the omni-channel has occurred rapidly and presents a more complex decision matrix for retailers. Specialty services associated with new technologies that excite the customer offer the benefit of more engagement and satisfaction, yet also bring additional considerations in how, when, and where to implement them. Take, for one example, the incorporation of drone delivery to enable last-mile service, perhaps within an hour of an order being placed. Projects combining drone research capabilities and retailer order fulfillment tests are frequently reported in the business press (Fox Business, 2019; *Transport Topics News*, 2019; PYMNTS.COM, 2019; Medium.com, 2018).

While the opportunity to more completely satisfy customers is driving such variations in retailer operations, there is a concurrent threat that a breakdown between and among the available touchpoints could strain customer service to the breaking point, driving frustrated customers away, perhaps to competitors. Better understanding how messages flowing from the various touchpoints may vary in meaning is an important goal for retailers, as it can help them clarify those messages and improve service policies and practices. This in turn can alleviate the type of miscommunication and misunderstanding that foster failed customer service.

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