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### Advancing Customer Experience Theory: Five-Way Conversations in Two-Person Customer-Marketer Talk

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# **Advancing Customer Experience Theory: Five-Way Conversations in Two-Person Customer-Marketer Talk**

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## **ABSTRACT**

This study advances customer experience theory (CET) by configuring research on talk, storytelling, customer-marketer interactions, and customer assessments of experiences in encounters with sales and hospitality/service representatives. Customers' introspections and assessments of their meetings with marketers constitutes one genre of storytelling that include not only surface talk between two persons but surface and subsurface (nonconscious) talk between persons and within self. Practical implications include creative storytelling scripts for performing in sales and service training programs in firms and classroom contexts. Given the centrality of face-to-face meetings in many consumer shopping contexts (e.g., cars, houses, medical services; campus visits by high school seniors and parents, insurance selling, clothes shopping; tourism and hospitality), advancing CET and personal selling/buying effectiveness represent worthwhile pursuits. The study is one step forward in reducing the relative scarcity of extant research on customer-marketer talk. Empirically, the study includes customers' thick descriptions of their self-marketer interactions via subjective personal introspections (SPI) and assessments of these exchanges.

Interpersonal verbalization is only one of five levels of processing that take place when a researcher observes a decision-maker in a marketing organization interact with a decision-maker in a customer organization. At level 2, the speaker, listener, and observer are consciously editing thoughts as well as surfacing unconscious thoughts to combine and change conscious editing of what is said, heard, or observed. Level 3 is an automatic process in which unconscious thoughts are brought into working memory to mingle with conscious processing and to send some of the conscious processing into unconscious storage. Level 4 includes unconscious processing between or among individuals that do not become part of conscious processes or verbalization. Level 5 processing spreads activation within the person's unconscious so that automatic thoughts and behaviors are set into motion without the individual being aware of the process.

Customers' introspections and assessments of their meetings with marketers constitutes one genre of storytelling that include not only surface talk between two persons but surface and subsurface (nonconscious) talk between persons and in within self. The study here includes

customers' thick descriptions of their self-marketer interactions via subjective personal introspections (SPI) and assessments of these exchanges. SPI uses the researcher as the subject of the study and allows for rich, thick, impressionistic narratives of the author's own experiences in a particular context.

Students in various marketing classes in five nations participated in a Trade Tales project. The Appendix provides a common set of instructions used by the Trade Tales Team members. All Trade Tales had a title page, abstract, story (with dialogue), five possible solutions with points awarded for choosing a particular solution and the rationale behind the choice, and surface (explicit) and deep (implicit/personal) assessments of the situation, story, and outcome assessments. Theory and practical implications: the participating student experiences "proper pleasure" in the re-telling of his or her story and also achieves better sense making and problem solving. The finalized versions of the Trade Tales can be used in other classes as case lets for studying customer-marketer interactions.

The following case study illustrates one of the stories collected for the Trade Tales Team project. To achieve anonymity, the names of firms and persons are disguised. "AbsolutelyBest Ham to Pocatello, Idaho, USA: Arrival Delay in Customer's Order" is the title of the case study. A customer goes on-line at firm's (AbsolutelyBest) website and orders 9-lb ham to be delivered to daughter's home in Pocatello, Idaho, on December 29th. Customer pays extra for two-day delivery service. Ham fails to arrive on December 29 due date. Customer asks for a credit on service not received. Bad weather hit most of the U.S. on December 28. What should the firm do? The full story appears in the paper with possible solutions for students to assess.

Practical implications for Trade Tales include creative scripts for performing in sales and service training programs in firms and classroom contexts. Trade Tales are useful as case studies in classroom instruction. Given the centrality of face-to-face meetings in many consumer shopping contexts (e.g., cars, houses, medical services; campus visits by high school seniors, insurance selling; clothes shopping; tourism and hospitality), the relative scarcity of extant research on customer-marketer talk is surprising and represents a vacuum that researchers need to fill.

## ABOUT THE AUTHORS

Carol M. Megehee (PhD, University of Texas, 1996) is Professor of Marketing, Coast Carolina University. Carol has contributed a stream of studies on storytelling research in consumer behavior.

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