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2010-01-13: Happy or unhappy, the customer is always right

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Happy or unhappy, the customer is always right



Professor Heidi Kevoe Feldman analyzed phone calls between roughly 500 customers and service representatives for a camera repair company in the Northeast. Photo by Craig Bailey.

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Understanding their dissatisfied customers and acting on the knowledge will help companies save money and reshape the way they conduct business, according to research by Heidi Kevoe Feldman, an assistant professor of communication studies at Northeastern.

Over a six-month period, Kevoe Feldman recorded—and subsequently analyzed—more than 60 hours of phone calls between roughly 500 customers and service representatives for a camera repair company in the Northeast. She hoped to determine how representatives handled customer complaints from a communications point of view in order to develop a strategy for making customer service calls more efficient.

“Society is built largely through talk—that’s how we understand each other. And one way to understand what’s going on in the

day-to-day lives of people at work is to examine social interaction through discourse, including talk,” said Kevoe Feldman, a conversation analyst whose research focuses on how organizational processes are built through verbal communication.

Before joining the Northeastern faculty, Kevoe Feldman was a lecturer at Rutgers University, where she earned her PhD in language and social interaction. She earned her Bachelor of Science degree from Northeastern in 1992.

For her most recent study, Kevoe Feldman analyzed calls made by customers seeking more information on the status of their broken cameras.

After listening to hours of recorded calls, she found that service representatives didn’t directly address customer queries regarding the wait time between camera repairs and receiving their good-as-new product in the mail. Instead, they offered a time frame for when the repair technician would fix the product—a tactic that is wholly unsatisfying for the customer.

“When a representative says that a customer’s product will be repaired in 10 to 20 business days, a customer might say, ‘Oh my god,’ and complain about the wait time,” she said, adding that representatives often shied away from specifying a date of return, out of fear of promising something that was not guaranteed.

Kevoe Feldman found that the company would be better off if its service representatives offered customers an approximate date for when their cameras would be returned, as opposed to when they will be fixed—even if they couldn’t be precise. “Customers understand they can’t get an exact date,” she explained, “but they’re looking for a time frame for when they can expect to have their product in their hands.”

That approach would reduce call time, saving the company money and creating more good will among customers.

Kevoe Feldman also found that service representatives who played the empathy card were wasting their time. Cranky callers treated their apologies as “very robotic and phony” and continued to complain, she said.

In the end, customers can play a large role in reshaping the way a company discloses its organizational knowledge, she said. After reporting her findings, the camera repair company took a number of steps to improve the quality of their customer service calls, which in turn reduced the amount of time representatives spent on the phone with customers.

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“There is an organizational structure in place,” she said, “but customers push back and reshape how things get done.”

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