



UNIVERSITY OF GOTHENBURG

Employees' Perception of the Role of Communication with Customers in Service Encounters

Case studies at Bank Customer Services in Vietnam

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ABSTRACT

Communication is one of the most important perspectives in service encounters. Communication is a connection between service employees and customers that could help them to interact, to understand and to establish relationships. In service organizational context, service representatives play a critical role in customer service communication. They are considered as the link connecting an organization to its customers. Therefore, perception of the important role of communication is required for their work.

This thesis aims to examine how service employees consider the role of communication and how they manage communication behaviors in customer encounters and in building relationships with customers.

Qualitative interview method has been used to investigate service employees. The data collection for the study has been performed through the semi-structures interviews with the bank tellers at the different banks in Vietnam, to examine their consideration and management of communication behaviors in service encounters and in building relationship with customers.

The findings of this study show that in the context of service, the bank tellers are aware of that communication is important in service encounter and in building relationship with customers. According to them, communication impacts directly on customers' satisfaction and decides the success of encounters. In addition, they consider that good perception about the role of communication in service encounters and in establishing relationships with customers helped the bank tellers to cope with problems in emotional displays and to avoid discriminatory service.

Keywords: Communication, Organizational Communication, Customers service communication, Employees-Customers communication, Interpersonal communication, Emotional labor, Feedback.

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1. INTRODUCTION

1.1. Background

We are living in a period in which economy is transferring from manufacturing to service orientation (O'Hair, 2008). It is true that to date, service is an integral part of the daily life that exists and relates to many human social activities. In fact, human may receive service in engaging contacts with others for instance at a grocery store, a hospital or a bank, and so on. Service orientation is defined as “the disposition to be helpful, thoughtful, considerate, and cooperative” (Hogan et al., 1984: 167). Ford (1995) claimed that since our economy is changing progressively to service orientation, organizations should focus more attentively on customers, in particular, communication toward customers. Thus, customer service encounter needs to be placed in a significant role. Miller (2006) also agreed that in the context of service economy, service encounter and service encounter communication are taking the primary places in organizational communication. Besides, customer relationship is emphasized important as well. According to O'Hair (2008), “primacy of customer” and “quality service” are the two important values among various found organizational values for the development and existence of a service organization (O'Hair, 2008:p202).

Communication between employees and customers is termed service encounter or service interaction. Service interactions play indeed a central part in our lives as Ford (2001) stated, “From health care to auto repair to banking, to clerical support, service interactions have become a significant part of our daily routines and the nature of these interactions may dramatically impact our overall quality of life” (Ford, 2001:p1). Service encounter between customer and service provider in most cases contain a series of interactions (John, 2006). In addition, each service encounter interaction is considered as performance in which employees must act to show their values to customers (Durvasula et al., 2005). Conversely, interactions in service encounters would also be opportunities for customers to assess the quality of service provided by organizations (John, 2006). Therefore, in a service orientation context, since customer service becomes

important to service organizations, employing good service employees may take a meaningful part for an organization's success (Baydoun et al., 2001:p606).

In summary, in the context of service orientation, service organizations need to care about customers and customer service communication. Therefore, it is important for organizations to improve and to change the way of communication and interaction with clients in order to adapt the rapid change of service orientation (Ford, 2003). As a result, they can serve and support customers in the best way.

1.2. Problem formulation

As stated earlier, service economy is on the way taking an important role in our lives. In the context of globalization, the Vietnamese economy could not avoid this trend due to the investments of international groups into the country and the establishment of trade relations with western countries in the early of 1990s. As a result, the contribution of service sector in national income increases enormously (Surborg, 2006). However, the process of transformation to economy service is still slow and weak compared to the rate of conversion over the world, as Surborg claimed "service sector is also growing, but at a slower pace" (Surborg, 2006:p249). The reasons could be explained by "the bureaucratism and authoritarianism that rife in Vietnamese society make people get involved in many difficulties and losses" (Ives, 2000: p9). Though the progress is still not good, the improvement of service quality for this transformation is occurring continuously and is considered importantly in most organizations over the country. It should be stressed that in Vietnam, it is easy to recognize the difference between public and private organizations in terms of service quality and awareness of importance of customer service. In reality, both these two types of organizations are trying to improve their customer service entirely. However, while public organizations are still slow in their progress of improvement, there is an advanced change in terms of communication behaviors towards customer at private organizations.

In the increasing of service quality improvement, customer service encounter is one of many factors that should be stressed on. For service organizations, communication

competence is the most important demand among employees in front line services. Moreover, for a successful and satisfied service interaction with customers, service employees play an important role in transferring the best quality of service of an organization. In an interaction process with customers, they might have to cope with problems raised because of the lack of courteous behaviors such as unsmiling, unfriendliness or performance negative emotion towards customer (Shukri Zain, 2010). Therefore, it is necessary for service representatives to understand the role of communication behavior in service encounters because that may affect on organization's image and relationships with customers.

1.3. Purpose

As I experienced before in Vietnam and from the observations of a person who has the chance to live in two countries, I find myself that the Swedish service quality is good in terms of service employees' communication behaviors and service environments. This observation inspired me doing a research about customer service encounters among the service employees from my country to examine their communication behaviors in the meetings with customers.

Communication is a connection between service employees and customers that can help them to interact, to understand and to establish relationships to each other. The purpose of this research is derived from the role of service employees in the service orientation economy. As described above, service representatives play an important and central role in customer service communication, as Staw et al. believed that understanding the importance of communication in encounters with customers is necessary for individuals to build and develop relationships with customers and to achieve career success (Staw et al., 1994). Therefore, this study aims to examine their communication behaviors by answer the two following questions:

1. How employees in front line services consider the role of communication behaviors in service encounters and in building relationships with customers?
2. How they manage these communication behaviors to deal with problems in service encounters?

2. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

This chapter presents a literature review on the main concepts related to customer service communication. These concepts are going to be used as a framework for the empirical data collection and analysis.

2.1. Organizational communication

There are various ways to understand communication concept (Miller, 2006). Lustig and Koester (2004) stated that communication is used in several meanings and purposes. Communication is mainly considered as a process of sending and receiving messages (Papa, 2007) or as an important means in the setting of “human socialization” (Shukri Zain, 2010:550). Hence, communication is an important channel of transferring and sharing information between sender and receiver in human daily life by different means. In every encounter, communication is determined by “personal, social, or human identities” (Gudykunst & Shapiro, 1996:22). It would say that communication occurs every day through encounters and influences on the establishing and maintenance relationship of people. Thus, being aware of communication in everyday encounters is necessary to explain how and why relationships are constituted, developed and upheld over time (Gudykunst & Shapiro, 1996).

According to Lustig and Koester, communication is contextual and takes place in many contexts: business, culture, education, health, and so on. Organization is one of various contexts in which communication is considered as a process occurring continuously. Effective communication is one of main aspects of modern organizational foundation that can lead to the recent changes of organizations (Baker, 2002). Thus, communication is seen as a critical and requisite part for the organizational functioning and success. Consequently, it would be difficult for the existence of those organizations if communication were absent (Sethi & Seth, 2009).

Understanding communication in organization is very diverse and fragmented because organizational communication is approached by different ways (Baker, 2002). Papa emphasized the essence of communication in organizational context and defined

communication is what happens inside organization including all content and the exchanges of information through formal and informal channels (Papa, 2007). Besides, the organizational communication can be approached according to the functional goals of organizational communication. Miller determined organizational communication can involve between individual inside and outside organization with the main purposes are dealing and solving problems (Miller, 2006) or accomplishing “common tasks and goals” (O’Hair, 2004). In summary, organizational communication includes internal and external activities through formal and informal means, by which the process of communication occurs vertical, horizontal, or diagonal directions with various functions such as making sense, persuading, making decision, or solving problems, etc. (Baker, 2002). Overall, organizational communication is “the central binding force that permits coordination among people and thus allows for organized behavior” (Myers and Myers, 1982:xv). Thus, organizational communication is important for the entire functioning and success of organizations though it not the only vital facet for the recent changes of organizations (Baker, 2002).

2.2. Interpersonal communication

In most communication process, interpersonal communication is the centre of every interaction. Interpersonal communication is a procedure in which people interact with each other to transfer messages, feelings, or behaviors through verbal and non-verbal language. According to West and Turner, interpersonal communication is “the process of message transaction between people (usually two) who work toward creating and sustaining shared meaning” (West and Turner, 2006:2). Baxter & Braithwaite defined "interpersonal communication is the production and processing of verbal and non-verbal messages between two or a few persons" (Baxter & Braithwaite. 2008:6).

Interpersonal communication or face-to-face interaction between individuals is another feature of organizational communication. Within an organizational context, Baker considered that interpersonal communication is a major form of communication (Baker, 2002). In fact, interpersonal communication can connect different organizational members together in order to work for the common goals of organization, as West and

Turner believed that interpersonal communication helps people to establish and to improve relationships with others in workplace (West and Turner, 2006). Problems occurring during a process of interpersonal communication could become a threat for the effectiveness of organizations' activities and performances. Thus, it is critical that organizational individuals should possess strong interpersonal skills that can help them to overcome barriers easier, develop, and reinforce relationships with others.

Interpersonal communication in customer meetings is one of various activities that take places outside organization. In the context of customer service communication, interpersonal communication is "the heart of customer relations" (O'Hair, 2008:202) and is embedded in every service encounter. For front line service employees, interpersonal communication is required competence when interacting with customers. In addition, acquiring strong interpersonal communication skills create benefits both individuals and organizations (O'Hair, 2008:179). The quality of interpersonal interaction between service representatives and customers can affect directly on customer satisfaction and relationship. Thus, through interpersonal communication, organizations can show their interests to customers for attracting and building long - term relationships with them, and vice versa, customers can recognized that their demands are listened attentively. Consequently, through interpersonal communication, the image and reputation of organizations could be showed (Shukri Zain, 2001).

2.3. Customer service communication

Customer service is a large concept related to various areas such as marketing, economy, management, psychology, and then spreads to communication research (Ford, 1994). Though service interactions are an integral part in our lives, they have not been retained much attention in communication research (Ford, 2001). Overall, many researchers on customer service encounter attempted to propose various definitions to understand the con concept of customer service communication. Customer service encounter is "a communication process in which an organizational representative presents products or professional assistance in exchange for another individual's money or cooperation" (Ford, 1999:p.341). Besides, communication of service encounters between customers

and employees is a human dyadic interaction and is interdependent each parties (Solomon et al., 1995). Service encounter is also defined as “a personal (and social) interaction between service provider and service customer” in which human behavior is assembled (John, 1996:61). He added, a service encounter is a social encounter in which interactions create the chance for customers and service providers to establish relationship or assess the service quality (John, 1996). Thus, it is necessary to have the mutual understanding of both individuals in the service encounters context. Shostack defined service encounter as “a period of time during which a consumer directly interacts with the service” (Shostack, 1985:243). According to Durvasula, this definition is more broadly and implies several factors such as "personnel and physical facilities" that related to a service process (Durvasula et al., 2005:2).

Customer service encounter have different outcomes that are emphasized by service organizations, for instance, customer satisfaction, customer loyalty, customer relationship or service quality, etc. Building relationship with customers was chosen as the focused issue for this research. In customer service communication, building relationship with customer is one of the primary goals of service organizations, in particular service organizations as Koermer stated: “building relationships with customers is an important part of conducting business” (Koermer, 2005:247). In building relationship with customer, service encounters are considered as an early sign to predict the development or discontinuation of a provider-customer relationship (Bolton, 1998). Koermer believed also that “one could ascertain that the communicative interplay between providers and customers plays a significant role in fostering relational development” (Koermer, 2005:248). Overall, effective customer service encounter is the fundamental part for organization's success and customer relationship retention (Julian & Ramaseshan, 1994).

From different definitions and perspectives on the customer-employee relationships by researchers in customer service, we can find that customer and service provider are the two important elements involving in an interaction of service encounter.

In fact, in customer service communication, service providers play the role as the face of organizations with multidimensional functions (Barker & Härtel, 2004). In general, they have to work according to a "set up program of organization's rule or social norms" to display their emotion in an appropriate way toward customers. However, there will be different in various places but the common goals are building relations with customers and satisfy them (Barker & Härtel, 2004). Durvasula et al. (2005) argued that service might be neutral but the behavior of service provider may have a significant impact on the feelings or emotions of customer. The authors believed that customer in a service encounter would be enjoyable and satisfying through contacting with helpful, experienced and pleasant service employee. By doing so, customer will stay loyalty and organization can retain relationship with customer. In reality, customer is a critical factor for activities and existence of an organization, in particular organizations that provide service to customers. Deng et al. (2010) argued that how to satisfy and maintain relationship with customers in order to have customer loyalty is the essential survival of profit organizations. Therefore, it is needed for organizations to understand the connection between customers' satisfaction and their durability of relationship with service provider (Bolton, 1998). Furthermore, organizations need to have policies for the "customer gratitude" (Palmatier et al., 2009) to have long-term relationship with customers.

2.4. Customer service as emotional labor

Research on emotion management is increasingly interested since the early 1990s in which emotion of interaction between clerk in front lines service and customer or common public has been focused (Morris & Feldman, 1996; Wadron, 1994). Emotion is a central and integral part in organization life when interacting with customer and with other members of the organization (Miller, 2006). The focus of my study however is on emotion in service customer of front line service clerks that is termed "emotional labor" by Hirschfeld (1983). Service employees have to interact and to communicate with customers, in which they usually deal with a number of tasks that contain certain degree of emotion (Wadron, 1994; Miller, 2006). Hirschfeld (1983) asserted that "emotional

labor” indicated service employees display anticipated emotions as a flexible process. In addition, according to her, emotional labor jobs "require the worker to produce an emotional state in another person" (Hochschild, 1983:147). Another author, Miller referred emotional labor is the concept used to refer jobs in which “specific” emotional expressions as a required aspect of the job (Miller, 2006).

Service orientation organizations that want to increase the success and profitability need to ensure that their front line service employees pay for their emotions when interacting with clients. As Hennig-Thurau et.al (2006) stated, service employees’ emotional displays can be considered as an assessment of service quality, customers’ satisfaction and enhancement of relationships between customers and employees. Therefore, service employees need to be trained norms about which emotions are suitable to explicit in interactions with their clients (Pugh, 2001). In a similar vein, Miller (2006) emphasized that service employees usually have to behave towards clients according to the rules established by organization. Such the rules are defined as emotion display rules. According to Grandey et al., emotional display rules are "norms or expectations that tell individuals whether and how to express emotion in social interactions" (Grandey et al., 2010:p3). Understanding emotions display rules in communication would help individuals to improve relationship with customer. Usually, employees in front lines service are trained to perform positive emotions towards customers (Rafaeli, 1989). Sutton & Rafaeli considered positive emotional display as a “presenting a warm outward demeanor during transaction with customers” (Sutton & Rafaeli, 1988:467). The display emotions (e.g. greetings, thanking behaviors, eye contact, smiling) towards customers must be the positive ones because emotion are contagious that can flow from person to person. Positive emotions come since expectation is responded. Ford’s (1995) findings showed that since service employee performs positive behaviors, evaluation of service quality from customers will be positive. In addition, the mood of customers will increase positively as well. Because of the direct interaction with customers, service employees' emotions can affect easily on their customers, as Pugh stated: "The display of positive emotion by employees is positively related to customers' positive affect" (Pugh, 2001: p1020). In fact, a person who is expressing positive or negative emotion can produce a

similar change of emotion feeling to others (Pugh, 2001). For instance, a smiling of service employee at customers may flow to their emotional state and thus affects on customers' view and assessment of organizations' service (Hennig-Thurau et al., 2006). As a result, organization could increase or decrease their opportunities of retention customer relationship.

2.5. Feedback in customer service communication

Feedback plays a crucial role in communication. Feedback makes sense and effective for communication. In the context of service, feedback is a channel where customers can express their needs, perspectives or judgments about organizations' activities and performances. Thus, feedback allows organizations to assess the effectiveness of their service quality and customers' satisfaction. According to Crowell et al, "feedback may serve more as a consequence than as an antecedent in the control of behavior" (Crowell et al.,1988:66).

Sources of feedback can be diverse but customers would be the best reference and primary source of information for organizations' feedback because of frequent and direct interactions with service providers. From customers, organizations can learn new and interesting information that can help them to improve their service more successful and productive. In doing so, the process of improvement of these organizations may occur faster than those do not acquire any feedback from customers (Voss et al., 2004). Thus, it is critical for organizations to encourage feedback from customers.

Feedback that organizations received can be positive or negative. Negative feedback is a sign of customers' dissatisfaction and indicates that organization's service does not meet customer's needs. Meanwhile positive feedback confirms the good service quality of organizations that allow them to reinforce relationship with customers. Voss et al. believed that "customer feedback is an often-overlooked factor in explaining the relationship between service quality and customer satisfaction" (Voss et al., 2004:212).

2.6. Summary

The main theoretical points that I presented above are the review of literature on the theories of customer service communication. This review aims to introduce the different perspectives of customer service communication that were derived from the research of marketing. In fact, customer service communication is a minor field of customer service that is studied much in marketing, economy, then psychology, etc. before spreading to communication (Ford, 1995).

Customer service communication that is considered as an external business practice, is a part of organizational communication field. Research on customer service communication has been focused on service encounter and service interaction between employees and customers. Interpersonal communication is always important in all communication process. In customer service communication, interpersonal communication is embedded in every client meetings. Studies on emotion and emotion management occupied the major places. As described earlier, customer service labor is considered as emotional labor in which emotional displays and emotional contagion are the two central aspects that a service provider needs to learn how to manage them in communication with customers. Customers' feedback however takes a minor place in research of customer service communication. Feedback benefits both customers and organizations. By giving feedback, customers can express their needs and rights to provided service. Meanwhile, by receiving feedback, organizations can increase their opportunities to improve service quality to satisfy customers.

Customer service communication aims to look for positive outcomes for organizations such as customer's satisfaction, customer's relationships, customer loyalty or service quality. By managing these above perspectives through communication customers, service organizations can reach not only one but also many of these results. In this study, I am going to focus on one of these above outcomes, establishing relationship with customers.

In the review of the theories, a number of definitions of the important concepts in customer service communication: communication, organizational communication, customer service communication, interpersonal communication, service encounters, customer and service provider, feedback were presented. In doing so, I could determine the scope for the study, use them to guide for the interviews, as well as to measure the awareness and management of communication among customer service employees.

3. METHODOLOGY

3.1. Data collection method

The data collection for the study has been performed through the qualitative interview method. The semi-structured interviews among 12 front line service employees were conducted based on the purposes of the study: (1) how the role of communication behaviors with customers is perceived by services employees, and (2) how they manage these communication behaviors to deal with problems in service encounters in order to build relationship with customers.

Interviewing is a type of qualitative research method in which unstructured or semi-structured are the two typical forms in quality research. Kvale defined the qualitative research interview as "an interview, whose purpose is to gather descriptions of the life-world of the interviewee with respect to interpretation of the meaning of the described phenomena" (Kvale, 1983:174).

In the beginning of the study, I preferred to conduct the semi-structured interview via telephone in which I could be able to make the interviewees speak up their own various experiences or elaborate more information asked from the questionnaire. However, due to the difficulties in video recording and the lack of collaboration from the informants, I decided later to conduct the semi-structured interviews via email.

It is sometimes difficult for researcher to determine how to select the interviewees and how many of them is enough for the interviews in qualitative research. The grounded theory of Glaser and Strauss (1967) provided an idea for theoretical sampling. The finishing of the interviews among 12 bank tellers enabled me conclude the situation. Many of them provided the same answers. According to the grounded theory, I had accomplished the "theoretical saturation" (Glaser and Strauss, 1967). Thus, I did not need to conduct any additional interviews.

3.2. Selection of interviewees

The bank tellers were chosen as the service employees for the study. They are working at the banks where the service employees are required a higher communication practice competence compared with other organizations. They are both the new and experienced employees who come from the different banks in Vietnam. These employees are working at front line services and engaging directly in encounters with customers. Their works are related much to the communication and interaction with customers. Thus, they could provide me a lot of their own experiences and problems about service encounter's communication behavior. Besides, I choose the bank tellers as the service employees to conduct the email interviews because they are considered as "the primary agents of customer relations" (Crowell et al., 1988:65).

The selection of the respondents was done through my previous friendship network that was also the involving members of the sample. With the help of these acquaintances, I could find out more respondents who agree to participate in the study. The selection of the respondents in such a way was termed snowball sampling method. Snowball sampling method is the process that begins from a minor set of seeds who serve as the first people to take part in the study. These participants then play an immediate role to recruit others. This recruiting process from the existing participants continues until the desired number of samples is attained (Salganik & Heckathorn, 2004 & Heckathorn, 2002).

3.3. Interview process

In this research, I wanted to conduct the interviews in Vietnam where it was easier for me to engage in contact with the interviewees. In that case, it should be better if I could come back to Vietnam to have face-to-face interviews but I had not have opportunities to do that. Therefore, I decided to design the interviews by using one of many new interview techniques: email interview. This means of interview enables communication concerning the remote individual and environment. As a result, I did not need to be in place to interview the employees. The questionnaire was sent via email to the chosen

participants. Decision of dispersed interviews selection was a bit challenge for me because this method of interview has both advantages and disadvantages. In this part, I therefore would like to review the comparison of advantages and disadvantages in using email for conducting qualitative interview.

3.3.1. Advantages of email-interview

The emergence of new technological means allows people to minimize cost of travelling and productivity. They spread in many fields, from education, organizational life, medical care and then research. They change gradually the way human interact each other due to their special characteristics and functions, as McCulloch & Osborne explained: “this trend is caused mainly by the expanding globalization of industry and commerce and the increased availability of low cost, network-based, desktop video conferencing” (McCulloch & Osborne, 1999:p1).

In the context of research, technology means change the way researchers collect data (Graffigna & Bosio, 2006). Besides, new communication technologies offer solutions to both the temporal and methodological issues faced by researchers, when all parties are digitally connected (Sedgwick & Spiers, 2009).

Email is one of the new emergent interview techniques. This method of interview is seen as an alternative instead of face-to-face interview and would be considered as a good way to replace face-to-face interview in case of the dispersed geography of the participants involving into interviews (Sedgwick & Spiers, 2009). In addition, email interview allows the participants to respond to the questions deeper because they may have more time to find out the required information and to formulate the answers (Opdenakker, 2006; Bampton & Cowton, 2002).

3.3.2. Disadvantages of email interview

Aside from the fact of advantages, email interview exits some disadvantages. Firstly, though “interviewing is largely a verbal process” (Bampton & Cowton, 2002:6), expression of nonverbal cues and using of non-verbal language are totally lacking in email interviews. Thus, the trust in the behaviors of interviewees is not as strong as a

face-to-face interview. I believe that if I could involve into face-to-face interviews, the interaction between the interviewer and the interviewees could get more friendly, opened and trusted. Secondly, the lack of the spontaneity in conducting email interview may reduce the richness of information provided by interviewees (Opdenakker, 2006; Bampton & Cowton, 2002). Another disadvantage of email interview is that I had to wait for the answers of the participants longer and sometimes had to remind them to send back their responded results.

Overall, as described above, due to a number of difficulties to collect data, I had to use email interview method though it may not be the most pertinent one for my study. The email interview could somehow allow me to collect necessary data to reach the aim of the study.

3.4. Interview guide

An interview guide with semi-structured was formulated to conduct the interviews. The questionnaire contains two parts with 10 questions. The first part aims to know how the role of communication is perceived by employees in service encounters to build relationships with customers. The second part composes the questions related to the management of communication behaviors as well as the experiences of the bank tellers in encounters with customers.

Since the interviews were done through via email, it was difficult for me to encourage the informants to share additional information besides the questions. However, the questionnaire was formulated in such a way that can facilitate the participants to provide their opinions as much as possible. Moreover, the questionnaire contains the open-ended questions in which the interviewees could describe their answers in a flexible way.

As described earlier, the interviews were done most through email. The first part of the questionnaire was supposed to explore the awareness about using communication of service employees in customer service encounters and in building relationship with clients. Therefore, the questions of the first part were formulated to examine communication competencies of the service providers: what are their strategies and how

is the frequency of using non-verbal language and emotional displays in terms of interactions with customers. In addition, the questions were posed to compare how differences their perceptions about customer service communication before and after working as the service employees.

The questions of the second part were formed to see how service employees manage their communication behaviors when interacting with customers. In this part, the interviewees were asked to provide their own experiences at workplace and their involved problems. The contents focused on the management of emotional displays, performance behaviors to different kinds of customers, getting feedback from customers and influences of working environment on communication process.

3.5. Ethical consideration

An ethical consideration for the informants involving in the interviews of this study was sent to the interviewees in order to respect their rights of participation. The ethical consideration informed the interviewees about the field and the purpose of the study in which their responses are anonymous, and are used only by the researcher and for the research purpose (see Appendix 1).

3.6. Reliability and Validity of the study

As Golafshani stated, "reliability and validity are conceptualized as trustworthiness, rigor and quality in qualitative paradigm" (Golafshani, 2003:604). Thus, reliability and validity are the two important concepts that researcher should considered to accomplish rigor of qualitative research (Morse et al., 2002). In order to ensure reliability and validity for the study, "verification strategies integral and self-correcting during the conduct of inquiry itself" (Morse et al, 2002:p1) were applied besides the additional strategies.

Firstly, to collect the data and to analyze the empirical data, I has followed structurally the proposed conceptual framework. Next, the questionnaire was in fact distributed among more than 12 service employees. However, some of them complained that the

questions were difficult to answer. Therefore, the questionnaire was corrected and modified a couple of times before officially being distributed to the chosen bank tellers to facilitate them to respond and even more to avoid superficiality in their answers. Finally, as described above, the posed questions were open-ended that encouraged the interviewees to think more carefully and to investigate more time to answer the questions. In doing so, the respondents could avoid the misunderstanding of the questions' content and the given concepts.

4. EMPIRICAL DATA

The empirical data have been collected among 12 participants who are the bank tellers interacting directly with customers. Vietnamese language has been interpreted from English to facilitate the responses for the participants. This chapter presents the empirical data in two parts based on the interview guide presented in the Appendix 2. In this chapter, I use the typical quotations from the interviewing data to exemplify the results.

4.1. Perception of the role of communication with customers

This part describes the empirical data result about the consideration of the bank tellers about communication and building relationship with customers through the communication behaviors. In addition, the part examines the communication competencies of the bank tellers: what are their strategies and how is the frequency of using non-verbal language in terms of interactions with the customers, and what benefits did they receive from the training activities of the organizations.

When asked about the role of communication in service encounters as well as in building relationships with customers, the bank tellers provided many opinions. Firstly, according to some of them, communication provides them good opportunities to establish relationships with customers because it is the best way to convey information to clients directly. The others said that communication allows them to help people smoothly in dealing stuffs concerning their duties and customers' needs. Besides, it makes them becoming more pleasant, active, and experienced individuals through the frequent contacts with customers though that can makes them sometime feel exhausting but also enthusiastic.

An interviewee clarified her consideration about the role of the communication as following: *“For me, communication competence is always important in meetings with customers for a front-line service employee. If I have a good communication competence, I know how to convey information to my customers in the best way for them to understand services provided by the organization. How to build trust is also important in*

communication with customers. When I have trust from my customers, it is easier for me to establish relationships with them."

When asked about their own strategies in interactions as well as in building relationships with customers, the bank tellers have provided a number of different strategies. Displaying courteous and opened behaviors were common answers from the bank tellers. According to their answers, such behaviors could help them to create friendliness and to avoid keeping distance when contacting with customers. Next, listening and talking to customers are two important skills that most of the bank tellers emphasized. In interaction with customers, the bank tellers are aware of that they need to listen to their clients attentively, express information in the most succinct and pertinent way, then speaking to customers with confidence in order to gain trust from them. Finally, learning from their colleagues is one of strategies that some of the bank tellers proposed.

Referring to her experienced strategies, a bank teller stated: *For example, my strategies are those: in meetings with new customers, I establish relationships with them by expressing courteous greeting behaviors. When working with my clients, I listen to them carefully to understand clearly their needs. For me, the first encounter with customers is very important for building relationships with them. If I behaved towards my customers well in the first time, they would return and even spread their first good impression to others which is very helpful for my company's image. On contrary, if customers were not satisfied in the first meeting, I may lose not only one customer but also many others."*

Besides their own strategies, the bank tellers have to build and retain relationships with customers according to the procedures of their organizations, for instance caring about customers by remembering their profiles, offering various products to them or responding possible demands from them. In addition, they said that it is needed before every meeting to prepare information related to meetings such as content, purpose, and customers' information.

Concerning to the need of using non-verbal language in communication with customers, the bank tellers explained that non-verbal language could initiate pleasant and comfortable meetings between them and their customers. In addition, using non-verbal

language creates closeness and friendliness with customers and brings them the feelings of being cared about. Sometimes, non-verbal language helped the bank tellers to fill gaps for their expressions to reinforce the effectiveness of conveying messages and to express interest to their customers. Consequently, meetings with customers could flow more smoothly and efficiently by using non-verbal language.

Regarding the benefits of communication training provided by organizations, they considered that the training activities are for the benefits of both the individuals and the organizations. Training is to enhance communication competence for the service employees, in particular for those new ones. Training is also to review the competencies of the current service employees. Finally, the training activities create the chances for the organizations in improving customers' satisfaction, retaining relationships with them, reinforcing organization's image, and raising the competition with other banks that are coming up much in the service economy.

Following is an opinion of a bank teller about training activities in her organization: *“Generally, my organization holds training programs for all employees in the company that do not specialize which target groups. For the front lines service employees, the top management considers that they must be the good sellers that need to have sufficient competences, including the communication one”*.

4.2. Management of problems in communication with customers

This part presents the investigated result of the service employees' management of communication problems when interacting with their customers. The questions have been formed to see how service employees manage emotional displays, performance behaviors to different kinds of customers, getting feedback from customers and influences of working environment on communication process.

When asked about their experienced communication problems in meetings with customers, most of the bank tellers mentioned that getting in troubles with customers are an integral part of service encounters. However, not all of the problems came from communication; they were various. To dealing with communication problems, the bank

tellers explained that they had to listen to the customers attentively to be able clarify the problems in a pertinent way if the problems were from the customers themselves. Otherwise, if the troubles were caused by the organizations, they had to take responsible and compensate damages for customers. Finally, it is important to place customers in a central position when dealing with problems and to avoid making customers get angry.

Referring to the display of emotions to customers, all of the bank tellers said that it is obvious to express positive emotions to their customers as much as they can, for instance: *“Of course I need to display the best emotion as far as I can to my customers. When I do that, I find my customer feel happy too”*. However, it was sometimes difficult for them to do that due to the influence of inside bad mood. Smiling at customers were common answers when asking how to avoid negative emotional displays. Besides, considering the satisfaction and happiness of customers as the goals of their works can help them to forget their negative emotions.

Concerning to the different expressions of behaviors towards different customers, most of the bank stated that they hardly did that. They just behaved more respect towards the elder customers, for example: *“Yes, I do, but through the age. In the encounter with the elder people, I may help them more carefully; explain everything more clearly and longer. Besides, I usually display courteous behaviors to the elder people than the younger ones.”*

The bank tellers like to have feedback from customers. However, half of them reported that they did not receive any feedback from their customers. The rest reported that it is only sometime they got feedback, for example: *“For me, I like to have feedback from my customers. However, actually, I have never received any feedback from them. The reason could be that most of the Vietnamese people do not like to give direct feedback to someone when they are not satisfied about something”*. All of them think that feedback is good for themselves, for their organizations and also for customers. They believe that through feedback, the organizations could improve their service quality or communication behaviors of employees in order to give the best service products to

customers. In addition, for customers, giving feedback means that they are interesting in the products of the organizations (both positive and negative).

The bank tellers considered an importance of the impact of working environment on their communication process with customers. The working environment may decide the good or bad of an encounter. They all complained about the lack or illogicality of the queue system at their banks. Besides, in some places, waiting chairs are not sufficient when there were many customers. These factors caused clutter in the waiting hall that impacts very much on the communication process of the bank tellers, for instance, making the bank tellers feel overloaded, stressed, and even lose their temper in the meetings with their customers. Following is one of their complaints: *“Yes. I agree with this. You know, most of reception places in Vietnam do not have queue system that causes the chaos in the waiting hall and impacts on service employee by making them more stress. The queue systems were introduced from the middle of 2010 that have improved the situation better. Another bad thing is the design of service counters that is much lower than customers makes me difficult in interacting face-to-face with them because I must raise my head highly to see my customers.”*

5. ANALYSIS AND DISCUSSION

This chapter presents the analysis and discussion about the above results that are based on the theoretical framework. The findings are discussed in two parts according to the two investigated issues. The first part analyzed the employees' awareness of communication in service encounters. This part also aims to see how they consider the importance of building relationship with customers through communication. The second part examines the management of communication behaviors of the employees in interaction with customers such as dealing with problems in emotional displays, behaving towards different customers, getting feedback and influence of working environment.

5.1. Awareness of the role of communication behaviors with customers in service encounters

5.1.1. Role of communication in service encounters and in building relationships with customers

Service employees contact many customers with various backgrounds in which communication plays an important role in meetings and in interactions. The empirical data showed that the interviewed service employees stressed on the importance of communication competence in terms of interaction with their customers. According to them, on the one hand, communication is important for meetings with customers in which they considered as good opportunities to establish relationships with them. On the other hand, communication is for helping people smoothly in dealing stuffs concerning their duties and customers' needs. Besides, the bank tellers believed that this job gives them opportunities to increase their communication competence. They become more active and pleasant individuals through frequent contacts with customers though they may face challenges every day. Consequently, they could get more experiences in helping their customers to handle various kinds of problems.

Since communication with customers is an integral part of their jobs, the bank tellers are aware of that they have to possess a strong communication competence in encounters

with their customers. It is also a requirement from their organizations that emphasized importantly communication among customers. In reality, in to date organizations, more and more employees recognize that communication is an important part of their work, in particularly, now the number of service workers is increasing highly compared with production workers (Baker, 2002).

Though the service employees emphasized the importance of communication in encounters with their customers, they denied to specify clearly how important is that. According to some of them, communication is important because it impacts directly on customers' satisfaction and decides the success of encounters. It should be added that an open and honest communication would help service employees to reach goals in relationships with customers by determining their particular traits (O'Hair, 2008).

Actually, to build and retain relation with customers, the service employees usually behave according to the setting rules of their organizations. However, the study reveals that the bank tellers own number of strategies for their communication in order to create, develop, and reinforce relationships with customers. According to them, the communication competences having is one part natural, another part is learned. Therefore, learning from the colleagues is one of their own strategies. As the service representatives for the organizations, they have to display courteous and opened behaviors towards customers such as smiling at customers, listening to them, and avoiding keeping distance with them. They believed that such courteous behaviors would express their friendliness, respect, and interest to customers.

The result also indicated that stress on talking and listening skills could bring effectiveness in their communication. They said that service employees need to know how to express information in the best succinct and most understanding way. Furthermore, they should also talk to customers with confidence to bring trust in their abilities and proficiencies to their customers. In addition, if they could gain trust from customers, it would be easier to persuade them to use the services of the company. As a result, the clients will be motivated to maintain relationship when they have trust in service employees and organizations (Sharma & Patterson, 1999).

In the context of customer service, building relationships with customers is particularly stressed by organizations through their representatives who are employees in front line services. For the bank tellers, they emphasized as well communication in building and maintaining relationships with their customers during service encounters, as O'Hair believed "successful employee-customer relationships are based on assertive, open, and friendly communication" (O'Hair, 2008:p204). Overall, the bank tellers understand the importance of communication in establishing relationships with their customers. In addition, it is critical for service providers to have talking and listening skills, persuasion and solving problems competencies. Trust plays also an important role in satisfying customers and keeping a long-term relationship with them.

5.1.2. Using non-verbal language in service encounters

Ketrow (1991) found that using non-verbal communication of bank tellers related to customers' satisfaction. In this study, the interviewees - bank tellers reveal that they regarded important the using of non-verbal language in communication with their customers. They believed that non-verbal language such as eyes contact or smile may enhance the effectiveness of conveying messages and the expression of interest to their customers. Using additional non-verbal language in interaction with customer in a moderate and courteous way helps them to start meetings more smoothly. It is true that using non-verbal language in an appropriate way in interaction with customers is the exhibition of courteous behaviors (Ford, 1994). As a result, they can make relationships with customers and build image for the company easier.

They also recognized that their customers preferred to contact with employees who use non-verbal language frequently, in particular the expression of eyes gaze, for instance when talking to their customers, the bank tellers try to look at the customer's eyes instead of look at another things such as computer or talking on the telephone. Another advantage of using non-verbal language is that when verbal language does not express enough what they want to express, non-verbal language in some cases could help the bank tellers to fill gaps for their expressions.

5.1.3. Training of communication competence for service employees

Though the communication behaviors of the bank tellers are good, before becoming the services employees, they did not learn much what is customer service communication. They just have deeper understanding and perception about their profession when officially becoming service employees. This fact is true as they described earlier that communication competence is one hand learned from others and in another hand developed by themselves during the working time.

The result indicated that the organizations, here are the banks emphasized the training for their service employees. The benefits are not only for the service employees, but also for the organizations. The training activities have not been focus only on the communication effectiveness that takes a minor place in the hold training of the organizations. The aims of the organizations' training are therefore different from each other. The first benefit of training is to enhance communication competence for the service employees, in particular for the new ones. Other benefits are to review the communication competencies of the current service employees that may be unsuitable for their positions. In common goals and benefits, the communication training is one of strategies for the organizations to improve customers' satisfaction, retain relationships with them, reinforce organization's image, and raise competition with other banks that are coming up much in the service economy. In summary, communication training is an initiation for service employees understanding and perceiving what to do, how to do, and why they are doing their jobs. Moreover, a service provider needs to be trained and restrained, particularly in listening skills and empathy (Sharma and Patterson, 1999). In addition, service personnel must have skills to fulfill their functions, dealing with problems and be reactive. In other words, "training is one of the common denominators for organizations that have excellent customer service" (Wagenheim & Reurink1991:p267).

5.2. Management of communication behaviors towards customers in service encounters

5.2.1. Communication problems in service encounters: emotional displays and discriminatory behaviors

Customer service consists of coping and dealing with problems in order to help customers to receive right goods and service that they need and desire (O'Hair, 2008). For the bank tellers, facing problems occurring during encounters are unavoidable. The bank tellers though with a good understanding of communication in encounters with their customers, involved often into the unexpected troubles. The common problems were often derived from the dissatisfaction of the customers after a meeting that made interactions between two parts becoming more difficult.

The goal of all encounters is getting a mutual understanding. The bank tellers described their strategies in dealing with problems by dividing the problems into two parts. First, the problems may come from customers. In this case, the bank tellers need to be patient to listen complaints from their customers in order to determine the problems. After that, they clarified the problems with a courteous and helpfulness behaviors in such a way of calming down the customers and avoiding making the customers get angry or making a small trouble becoming bigger. The final goal is reaching a mutual understanding after all the meetings to retain the customers. Second, the problems may be caused by the service employees themselves. In this case, it is important to say sorry to the customers and to take responsible for their mistakes. Then, the organizations must respond the requirements from customers and compensate the damages for them. In all cases, the strategies can be different from the bank tellers. However, they must place their customers in the centre for the last goals in all encounters are customers' satisfaction and retention of long-term relations with them.

As described in the theory, a service employee in most cases must display their emotions according to the norms of organizations, and the bank tellers too. The investigations mentioned that positive emotional displays of the bank tellers are for the benefit of the organizations and for themselves. Their customers would appreciate them when they are

smiling and greeting courteously. Previous researches also showed that service providers might perform positive emotions such as "friendliness, immediacy, sociability, attentiveness, touching, or smiling in order to enhance close relationships with customers (Ford, 1994).

Service employees' emotional displays are distinguished by experienced and expressed emotions. Thus, not all positive displayed emotions are experienced emotions because service employees know what pertinent emotions they should express in interaction with customers (Pugh, 2001). As the result from the interviews revealed, for the bank tellers, they sometimes have difficulties in displaying positive emotions due to personal reasons. In such situations, they should still manage to perform positive emotions in meetings with customers, for instance, they avoided their negative feelings by considering encounters with customers as relaxing moments, or smiling is a best way to hide and forget bad moods inside them. Finally, in order to avoid the problems of negative emotional displays, they considered the happiness and satisfaction of the customers as the goals of their work.

Another problem in customer encounters that service representatives could involve in is behaving differently to different customers, for instance, through the appearance, gender or age. However, the empirical data showed that the bank teller did not do that. They contacted with several kinds of customers but in all situations, they behaved them with the same attitudes. They added that in one hand it is no sense to distinguish the customers because all of them are important for the organizations' profit, and in another hand, their organizations do not allow them to behave customers differently. Discriminatory service is one of unethical issues in customer service. It is true that customer discrimination is harmful organizations. The common discriminatory behaviors are the lack of greetings, unsmiling, eyes contacts, and thanking to people that service employees see dissimilarly with others (Ford, 1996). Nevertheless, the elder customers are the special people that the bank tellers need to behave differently than others. For instance, they had to respect them and helping them more carefully. This is in fact a cultural trait of the Vietnamese people.

5.2.2. Feedback in service encounters

The findings from the empirical data emphasized the role of feedback in customers service communication. The bank tellers like to have feedback from the customers. They think that customers' feedback is necessary for the organizations and for themselves. Feedback is a good parameter to measure service quality satisfaction. Giving feedback means that the customers are interesting in the products of the organizations. Feedback can increase perception of customers about their important role in the service delivery of organizations (Voss, 2004). Thus, it is critical that they should provide feedback for organizations for their rights and benefits in relations with organizations.

Feedback received could be both negative and positive that in any cases for the benefits of organizations. For organizations, getting negative feedback from customers would help them and their service employees themselves to fulfill the gaps in their activities. Moreover, organizations could through the feedback review their employees in terms of communication with customers. However, in the case of the bank tellers, it is a pity that they did not receive much feedback from their customers. The reason may be the Vietnamese people do not have the habit of giving feedback directly to responsible people. Instead of that, they tell their dissatisfactions to a third party. That is more harmful than giving direct feedback because organizations may lose not only one customer but also many others.

5.2.3. Influence of working environment

The result indicated that working environment could effect on the service encounters. Consequently, it influences on customers' satisfaction. The bank tellers considered importantly a good working environment for the success meetings with the customers. Therefore, organizations have to set up and maintain good climate to support their employees in delivering excellent service to customers (Johnson, 1996). However, most of the bank tellers complained about the lack or illogicality of the queue system at their

banks. In some places, waiting chairs are not sufficient when there were many customers. These factors caused the clutter in the waiting hall that affected very much on the communication process of the bank tellers, for instance, making the bank tellers feel overloaded, stressed, and even lose their temper in meetings with their customers.

6. CONCLUSION

This chapter draws the final answers to the research questions. In addition, the limitations of the study are mentioned, and some suggestions for further studies are proposed.

6.1. Answers to the research questions

This study concludes that the service employees of the banks have emphasized the role of communication in service encounters and in building relationship with customers. Communication plays an important part in their jobs because it impacts directly on gaining trust from customers and bringing satisfaction for customers. Communication may even decide the success of service encounters. Similar to Ketrow (1991), the result in this study shows that relationships between customers and organizations may be affected through the effectiveness of communication from organization's service representatives. To have effectiveness in communication, the common courteous behaviors that the bank tellers have to act towards their customers are smiling, greetings, using eyes contact, and thanking. Besides, owning main competencies such as listening, persuasion and problems solving is necessary for the service jobs.

Communication is important not only in meetings with customers but also in building relationships with them. Through communication, the bank tellers can establish relationship with their customers. Communication creates opportunities for the bank tellers to build trust with their customers that may later affect whether the customers continue or not their relationships with the organization. Thus, communication and building relationships are related to each other. Communication is a base not only for establishing but also for continuing and maintaining relationships with customers.

This study has also shown that a good perception of the role of communication in service encounters and in establishing relationships with customers could help the bank tellers to cope with problems raised in emotional displays and to avoid discriminatory service.

Emotional displays are a required facet in customer service encounters. Though the bank tellers said that they usually express positive emotions to their customers, this expression is sometimes affected by personal negative emotions inside them. However, they are aware of that they must not perform it in service encounters with their customers. Thus, it is sometime difficult to distinguish "experienced and expressed emotions" at service representatives, as Pugh (2001) also has put forward. Aside from this fact, the result shows surprisingly that the bank tellers have not considered at all appearance or gender in contacting with customers. They behave towards all kinds of customers with the same courteous behaviors because all of them are important for the organizations' profit. Though the bank tellers always try to manage problems in a best way to provide the best quality to their clients, the study finds that the bad management of the organizations and the lack of feedback from customers are such the factors that influence on the effectiveness interactions of the bank tellers.

6.2. Limitations

The research has been designed to examine how service representatives are aware of the role of communication and manage communication in service encounters to establish relationships with customers. Thus, the approach of data is limited to only one group. Communication is a two-way interaction process. In this case, trust in the given information from the bank tellers would be reinforced if customers could have provided their point of views. Also, the trustworthiness of the research might be stronger if I would have opportunities to extend access data among customers involving in service encounters with the bank tellers. In addition, customer is a good measure and reflection source of service encounters' quality. Therefore, it would be more useful to investigate how customers consider the role of communication affecting on their estimation in meetings with service employees.

As such, conducting the study through email interviews has limited trust in the responses due to the lack of verbal cues of the interviewees. It seemed that the bank tellers tended to provide good information in some answers to avoid uncertainty and risk for their

works in future. Thus, face-to-face interviews could help me to verify their responses through the expressions of feelings, tone of voice and emotions.

Finally, the validity of the study might be improved if I could have used additional observation methodology to observe interaction between customers and the bank tellers. In fact, in the beginning of the research, I intended to tape video their interactions or even only could observe the employees' behaviors while interacting with a customer. By doing so, the result of this study could be showed more objectively. However, because of the lack of agreement from the top manager, I could not get access additional data to that.

6.3. Suggestions for further research

Since customer service communication emphasizes the role of customers as parameter of service employees' behavior in service encounters, I suggest that further study shall be carried on this target group in order to explore additional evidences of service providers' awareness of the role of communication in their profession.

Building relationships with customers is one of different facets of interaction between customers and service representatives. As the thesis chose customer relationships to investigate, further research could be conducted to look for different outcomes of communication in service encounters, for instance, trust, customer loyalty, service quality or customer satisfaction that are also considered important issues of communication between customers and service representatives. Besides, emotional displays can be seen as an integral part and even a measure of these above outcomes. Therefore, it would be more interesting to specify the role of this perspective in service interaction in future research. In addition, observation method could be introduced to explore how emotion is performed by service employees towards their customers in the context of customer service communication.

APPENDIX 1 ETHICAL CONSIDERATION



UNIVERSITY OF GOTHENBURG

I would like to thank you for taking the time to my study. I am currently a master student in Communication program at University of Gothenburg, Sweden. I have been working towards my master thesis in communication field with the purpose to understand how counter service employees consider the role of communication behaviors in encounter with customers. In addition, I would like you to share your experiences in management of the problems in communication with customer during a service encounter process.

This is a semi-structured interview. Your participation is anonymous. The shared information will be used only by the researcher and for the research purpose.

Thank you very much for your participation.

Researcher

Interviewee

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.....

APPENDIX 2 INTERVIEW GUIDE

Part I - How communication in encounters with customers is considered.

1. How long have you worked as a service employee? How do you like the job and why? Please elaborate.
2. According to you, how is the role of communication in meetings and in the building relationships with customers in the context of service encounters?
3. What are your own communicative strategies in interaction with your customers to establish relationships with them?
4. How do you think about the using of non-verbal language (eyes gaze, smiling, etc.) in the encounters with your customers?
5. Before becoming a front-line service employee, how much did you learn about customer service communication?

Are there communication's training activities held by your organization? Could you provide some of the benefits of these training activities?

Part II - Management of communication behaviors

1. Have you ever experienced any communication problem raised in encounters? Please provide your problems. How do you overcome the problems?
2. As a service employee, how do you display emotions to your customers? According to you, how to avoid negative emotional displays in interaction with your customers?
3. Have you behaved differently towards different people through older, gender or appearance? Please elaborate
4. What do you think about customers' feedback, in particular feedback about your communication behaviors?
5. Do you think the working environment (design of counter, queue system, etc) could impact (negative and positive) on your service encounter communication process?

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