



Communicative skills that support value creation: A study of B2B interactions between customers and customer service representatives

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ABSTRACT

Although interaction has been acknowledged as central in value creation there is still a lack of empirical studies on how value creation is accomplished in practice, and in particular how communicative skills support customers' value creation. The purpose of this paper is therefore to generate a deeper understanding of how customer service representatives' communicative skills in conversations with customers support customers' value creation. We argue that value creating processes correspond to customers' roles as "feelers", "thinkers" and "doers". Accordingly, value creation involves three interdependent elements, an emotional, a cognitive and a behavioral. Based on a qualitative research design, drawing on an empirical study of 80 telephone conversations between customers and customer service representatives in a business-to-business context, the paper demonstrates three communicative skills that are essential in supporting customers' value creation: attentiveness, perceptiveness and responsiveness. The findings show how employees, by means of these communicative skills support customers' value creation. Attentiveness supports cognitive elements of the customers' value creating processes, whereas perceptiveness supports value creation in terms of cognitive, behavioral and emotional aspects. Finally, responsiveness supports the customer's cognitive as well as behavioral value creation.

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1. Introduction

Value creation has emerged as a central notion in contemporary service research (e.g. Edvardsson, Gustafsson, & Roos, 2005; Normann, 2001; Normann & Ramirez, 1993; Raval & Grönroos, 1996; Wikström, 1996) and as an important new way of portraying service: "service is a perspective on value creation rather than a category of market; the focus is on value through the lens of the customer; and co-creation of value with customers is key" (Edvardsson et al., 2005: 118). This service-centered perspective on value creation emphasizes *interaction* between customer and firm as central to creating value (Grönroos, 2011). It is through interactions that value is created, seeing that information is exchanged, consumed (i.e. existing information utilized) and produced (i.e. new information created) as well as knowledge is generated, and services are co-designed and co-created (Berthon & John, 2006). As Grönroos (2008) claims, a service provider has an opportunity, through customer interaction, to actively influence the flow and outcome of the consumption process (value creation) while the customers have the

opportunity to influence the activities of the service provider. This interaction view (Echeverri & Skälén, 2011) stands in contrast to and challenges the non-interactive perspective where value is seen as being embedded in the products and services provided by selling firm. Value is according to the service-centered perspective fundamentally derived and determined in customers' use (value-in-use) (Vargo & Lusch, 2004a,b; Vargo, Maglio, & Akaka, 2008). Several researchers argue that customers create value independently, but with the support of the supplier (Payne, Storbacka, & Frow, 2007; Storbacka & Lehtinen, 2001). For this reason, and in line with Grönroos (2008), we use the term value creation when referring to the customers' role, and the term value co-creation when referring to the suppliers' role. That is, customers create value for themselves in their everyday practices and the firm develops opportunities to co-create value with and for the customers in their interactive contacts with them (Grönroos, 2008: 299). Interaction can in this perspective be seen as a "generator of service experience and value-in-use" (Ballantyne & Varey, 2006a: 336).

However, although the notion of interaction has been acknowledged in the literature, there is surprisingly few empirical studies on how value creation is accomplished in practice (Echeverri & Skälén, 2011; Vargo et al., 2008), and in particular how communicative interaction supports value creation. As Lindgreen and Wynstra (2005) state there have been relatively few attempts to, in great

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detail, investigate ongoing interaction processes between buyers and sellers. Most research on value creation with an interaction view is conceptual (e.g. Vargo & Lusch, 2004a,b) or draw on anecdotal data (e.g. Prahalad & Ramaswamy, 2004). Several researchers call for more closely observations of everyday interactions between providers and customers (Echeverri & Skålén, 2011; Woodruff & Flint, 2006). This enables a greater understanding of customers' everyday practices and value-generating processes and also creates opportunities for the supplier to engage itself with its customers' value-generating processes and thus become a co-creator of value with its customers (Grönroos, 2008).

In this paper we focus on interactive processes that support customers' value creation in their everyday practices (cf. Grönroos, 2008). The purpose of this paper is to generate a deeper understanding of how customer service representatives' (CSRs) communicative skills in conversations with customers support customers' value creation. How do the communicative skills serve as a foundation for customers' value creation? The concept of value is used in accordance with thoughts within the service-dominant (SD) logic, as will be evident below. The study is based on everyday interactions in the form of telephone conversations between CSRs in an industrial company and their customers. Such conversations between customers and CSRs are but one form of action in the overall interaction process between the buying and selling firm (see Holmlund, 2004 for an outline of different interaction levels in a relationship). Interaction between a buying and selling firm can also entail certain amounts of self-service, e.g. when a customer places an order or searches information through a system provided by the selling firm. However, we choose to exclude such interactions and focus on communication where two people are involved, i.e. a customer and a CSR.

Frontline staffs play a strategic role in value creating activities (Wikström, 1996), since they are often the primary point of contact before, during and, after a purchase (Chung-Herrera, Goldschmidt, & Hoffman, 2004). They are also of importance in developing customers' trust (Darian, Wiman, & Tucci, 2005), increasing their service encounter satisfaction (Bitner, Booms, & Tetreault, 1990), and providing service recovery when failures occur (Bell & Luddington, 2006; Maxham & Netemeyer, 2003). The human interaction element is thus essential when determining whether or not service delivery is to be deemed satisfactory (Chebat & Kollias, 2000). Corresponding to Day and Crask (2000) we acknowledge that the concept of value is separated from customer satisfaction, although they are related seeing that satisfaction is a reaction to perceived value. Furthermore, satisfaction can only be assessed after consumption, while value is possible to evaluate before, during and after consumption.

At first in the paper we discuss previous research on value and communicative interaction. This is followed by a section covering a theoretical framework on conversation and value creation. Subsequently, we describe the research design. Our findings in Section 5 are divided into three subsections that relate to different categories of communicative skills, that is, attentiveness, perceptiveness and responsiveness. We argue that these communicative skills are supporting emotional-cognitive and behavioral elements of the customer's value creation. Then the wider implications of our results are discussed and concluded. In the last two sections we account for the study's managerial implications, discuss limitations and make suggestions for future research in this area.

2. On value and communicative interaction

There are generally two meanings of value, as described by Vargo et al. (2008): value-in-exchange and value-in-use. The former refers to the traditional view of value and value creation, i.e. the goods-dominant (G-D) logic, where value is seen as created by the firm and distributed in the market, usually through exchange of goods and money (Vargo et al., 2008). A main difference in this view,

compared to the concept of value-in-use, is that the former assumes that value is being destroyed during consumption, while value-in-use denotes the rather opposite. This meaning relates to the S-D logic where value is seen as "always co-created, jointly and reciprocally, in interactions among providers and beneficiaries through the integration of resources and application of competences" (Vargo et al., 2008: 146). This co-creation situation is accomplished when the provider and customer apply their different competences and skills in the process, or in Vargo and Lusch's (2004a,b) words, apply their "operant resources".

Drawing from and elaborating on Payne et al.'s (2007) co-creation framework, we argue that value creating processes correspond to customers' roles as "feelers", "thinkers" and "doers". Accordingly, value creation involves three interdependent elements, an emotional, a cognitive and a behavioral. Emotional value elements refer to the customer's feelings or affective state, cognitive value refers to processes that for example include attention, information-processing and solving problems, and lastly, behavioral value that concerns action that stems from the interaction, such as making decisions.

In order to make value propositions and co-create value with the customer, the communication needs to center on dialog with the customer (Lusch & Vargo, 2006). Other conceptual research has also recognized the importance of dialog in the value-creation process between the buying firm and selling firm (Duncan & Moriarty, 1998; Grönroos, 2000; Tzokas & Saren, 1997; 1999). Grönroos (2000) states that a dialog can be seen as an interactive process of reasoning together so that a common knowledge platform is created, which in turn enables value to be created. The communication process between customers and employees is also essential for the formation of satisfaction since it can result in a mutually held view regarding expectations and performance (Selnes, 1998). The notion of mutual understanding is further underscored in terms of relationship-specific knowledge, i.e. coping knowledge about how to deal with one another, which is primarily grounded in interaction (Ballantyne, 2004).

Within service research dialogical communication is described as a learning process (Ballantyne, 2004; Ballantyne & Varey, 2006b) with the purpose of being "open-ended, discovery oriented, mutually achievable and value creating" (Varey & Ballantyne, 2005: 16).

Conversation is, as an essential part of communication, seen as a medium for knowledge co-creation, transfer of knowledge and developing a shared meaning (Normann, 2001; Von Krogh, Ichijo, & Nonaka, 2000). In this view, employees' communicative skills are imperative to support customers' value creation. The reason for this is that the customer's role, within a S-D logic perspective, involves learning on how to use and adapt the value proposition to their individual needs and usage situation in order to create value (Vargo & Lusch, 2004a). Customers' ability to create value is also a direct effect of the amount of information, knowledge and other resources they gain access to (Normann, 2001). The more a customer understands about the opportunities available, the greater the value that can be created (Payne et al., 2007). According to Ballantyne (2004), such customer learning processes are above all, carried out in dialog between the customer and the employee. Hence, communication mediates employees' knowledge and customers' needs, since it supports the customer opportunity to create value.

3. Conversations and value creation – a framework of communicative skills

In this section we propose a framework of three communicative skills in conversations that in different ways support customers' value-creating processes. In doing so, we connect CSRs' communicative skills to the concept of value creation.

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