

“What sounds beautiful is good?” How vocal attractiveness affects customers’ evaluation of voice-to-voice service encounters

Bartsch/Kantsperger/Meyer/Semmler (Munich, Germany)

For service companies it becomes more and more important to understand which factors of service encounters determine customers’ service evaluation. Existing research shows that customer’s assessment of service quality and satisfaction is strongly influenced by the service outcome (e.g. Parasuraman/Zeithaml/Berry 1985; Grönroos 1990; Mohr/Bitner 1995) and the employee behaviour (e.g. Specht/Fichtel/Meyer 2006; Specht 2006; Mohr/Bitner 1995; Bitner/Booms/Tetreault 1990). Further studies claim the importance of employee attractiveness (moderated by target gender) in face-to-face service encounters (e.g. Fichtel 2007; Reingen/Kernan 1993; McElroy/DeCarlo 1999).

Based on the approved impact of the physical attractiveness stereotype on the customers’ service evaluation we assumed that the vocal attractiveness stereotype (“what sounds beautiful is good”) has similar effects in the voice-to-voice service encounter. As service literature shows a lack of empirical research on this topic we based our research on scientific findings of other disciplines like linguistics and phonetics (e.g. Zuckerman/Driver 1989; Zuckerman/Hodgins/ Miyake 1990; Zuckerman/Miyake 1993). In these fields of research the vocal attractiveness is determined by vocal cues like intonation and speech rate and has been proved as stereotype information (e.g. Zuckerman/Driver 1989; Knapp/Hall 2006).

Combining service research with findings of linguistics and phonetics our study analyzed the impact of employees’ vocal attractiveness on customers’ perception and evaluation of voice-to-voice service encounters. Due to the approved importance of service outcome we considered this in the design of our study. Further research on physical attractiveness also indicates a moderating effect of gender (e.g. Farley et al. 1998), which also was considered.

To test our theoretical considerations based on social psychological theories (e.g. attribution theory, social categorization schema theory), linguistics and phonetics we applied a 2x2x2 experimental design, manipulating vocal attractiveness (attractive voice/unattractive voice) as well as gender (male/female) and service outcome (positive outcome/negative outcome). Other behavioural factors like effort and ability (e.g. Specht 2006; Mohr/Bitner 1995) as well as situational factors are physically controlled within the design. To assure external validity, especially ecological validity, we produced audio tape stimuli simulating real-life customer-employee-interactions (inbound calls in tourism industry). Results showed that perceived vocal attractiveness has a significant positive impact on customers’ attribution of effort and abilities of call center agents as well as on customer satisfaction (even independent from the service outcome).

Our research provides interesting and fundamental insight for a deeper understanding of customer-employee-interaction within voice-to-voice service encounters. Our results do not only contribute to customer satisfaction research but will also help to provide managerial implications for service and call centre management as well as human resource management.

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Contact Details:

Silke Bartsch
Research and Teaching Assistant
Institute for Marketing
Ludwig-Maximilians-Universität (LMU) Munich
Ludwigstr. 28 RG
80539 München
GERMANY
Phone: +49 (0) 89 2180 3321, Fax, +49 (0) 89 2180 3322
e-mail: bartsch@bwl.lmu.de