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Responding to customer questions and complaints is no easy task. There are many aspects that come into play when talking to customers, one of which is a small category of words people use to refer to themselves and the customer—personal pronouns. Through five studies, we explored the impact of using “I,” “we,” and “you” pronouns on purchase behaviors and customer satisfaction in sales and service interactions. What we found challenges conventional wisdom and practice when it comes to talking to customers.

Popular Belief About Pronouns

Previous research on pronouns has shaped how these words are understood in customer interaction settings and beyond. For example, “I” pronouns (I, me, my) have been historically associated with a speaker’s negative traits, such as egotistical self-interest, while “you” pronouns (you, your, yours) seem the kind of thing an agent might say if they were oriented towards the customer’s needs. It is not surprising, then, that the findings of three pilot studies we performed show that managers and client-facing employees believe that customer interactions should emphasize a “firm’s concern for customers” and downplay a “concern for the self” (in other words, the agent). Linguistically, this practice might translate into an increased use of “we” (the firm) and “you” (the customer) pronouns, while avoiding the use of “I” pronouns. We predicted that this approach is not ideal.

Empathy and Agency

Why wouldn’t an increased use of “we” and “you” pronouns be the best approach for sales and service agents? Take the real estate context. Prior research tells us that if a home buyer perceives that their agent feels and acts on their personal behalf (empathy and agency, respectively), they’ll be more satisfied with the agent and likely to purchase a home with them. Contrary to conventional wisdom, we proposed that “I” pronouns might actually have positive benefits when it comes to these important service perceptions. First person singular pronouns may signal a more personal, one-on-one approach and a sense of caring, responsibility, and autonomy than plural references to the agent as part of the company (“we”) pronouns. Through five studies, we tested this prediction. Some of our studies also challenged managerial beliefs about the importance of referring to “you” the customer.
Relationships Between Pronouns and Purchases

In our first study, we analyzed over 1,200 customer-firm email interactions as an initial assessment of how pronouns affect purchase behavior. These interactions were provided by a large online retailer and linked to purchase accounts with purchase data before and after the interactions. We analyzed the relationship between the personal pronouns used in these email interactions with the customer’s total purchases for 90 days after the interaction.

Our results indicated that, contrary to what people in service businesses believe, a firm agent’s use of “I” pronouns is linked to increased customer purchases, while the use of “we” and “you” pronouns are not. We then turned to laboratory studies to validate the relationship we found in the field and to test our hypotheses about why these pronouns affect customers.

Our second study compared the effects of “I” versus “we” pronouns on customer satisfaction and purchase intent using carefully controlled language in which we only varied pronoun use. Participants played the role of customers in two unrelated interactions—an inquiry and a complaint. Real email responses from the agents of six companies were used for this study, which either reflected an original wording using “we” pronouns or a modified version using “I” pronouns. Participants were asked to indicate their satisfaction with the agent and purchase intentions toward the firm. Results showed that, compared with “we” pronouns, “I” pronouns led to increased customer satisfaction with the agent and purchase intentions with the company.

Our next study sought to prove that this result was due to a positive effect of “I” pronouns rather than a negative effect of “we” pronouns. Participants were shown agent’s responses about an order pending delivery and asked to rate their satisfaction, purchase intention, and the agent’s empathy and agency. The responses used either “I” pronouns (e.g. “I’m happy to help!”), “we” pronouns (“We’re happy to help!”), or—our control group—no pronouns (e.g. “Happy to help!”). Consistent with previous results, this experiment revealed that (1), unlike “we” or no pronouns, “I” pronouns had a positive effect on customers and that (2) perceptions of agency and empathy were the reason why self-referencing “I” pronouns matter.

We did find, however, a limit to the positive impact “I” pronouns can have on customers, which we discovered in our fourth study. Participants imagined that they were approached in person by a sales agent with whom they had previously interacted. Depending on the condition to which they were randomly assigned, participants were approached with a salesperson using either “I” or “we” pronouns, and were either cued that they’d had positive prior experiences with the sales agent or were not given this cue. The results revealed that the positive effect of “I” pronouns use was weakened when customers had other stronger indicators of an agent’s empathy and agency, in this case, a favorable past perception.
What About “You”?  

Our last study explored manager and frontline employees’ beliefs about the positive effects of using “you” pronouns to refer to the customer. Participants imagined they had emailed a company about a product return. They were presented with one of three responses that either (1) used “you” pronouns to refer to the customer as the subject or actor (“You can look into your account”), (2) used “you” pronouns to refer to the customer as the object or recipient of action (“Your account can be looked into”) or (3) used no “you” pronouns (“The account can be looked into”). As we predicted, there was no effect when “you” pronouns were used to refer to the customer as a grammatical object of the sentence, which is how managers and agents believe they should be referenced to make their “customer orientation” clear. That is, the positive benefit of customer referencing “you” pronouns wasn’t supported in this or other studies we ran. However, when “you” pronouns were used to refer to the customer as the actor or subject of the sentence, there was a negative impact, as customers perceived agents weren’t caring or working on their behalf. We speculate this is because they made it seem like “you” the customer are the one doing the work (e.g. “You can look into your account”).

Real Estate Applications  

For real estate agents, simply replacing “we” pronouns with “I” pronouns when replying to customers should lead to increased customer satisfaction and purchase intention. In fact, data from our first study with one company suggested that applying this simple change could be linked to a revenue increase of up to 7%. Additionally, when answering customer questions or complaints, real estate professionals should be careful about their use of “you” pronouns. Agents should avoid using “you” pronouns to refer to a customer as the actor or subject of the sentence whenever possible, as this approach can decrease perceptions of the agent’s own empathy and agency on behalf of the customer. These small words could have big implications for how real estate firms and professionals talk to customers and can be implemented easily.

Recommended Reading  


Reference


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Grant Packard’s (PhD – University of Michigan) research explores self-concepts, motivation, language, perception, and interpersonal influence in interactions among consumers and with firm agents. His research has been published in top-tier journals and presented at leading conferences. Before entering academia, Grant was a marketing executive for Chapters/Indigo and Excite Canada and worked with advertising agencies DMB&B New York and BBDO Toronto.

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