CHAPTER V

DISCUSSION OF THE FINDINGS AND CONCLUSION

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5.1 Findings and conclusion of the quantitative analysis

The targeted sectors have yielded enough respondents from different profiles. Past work experience indicates a strong need for trainers and training materials for English language usage and as a tool for communication especially in the corporate world. A news item appearing on NDTV 24x7 in March, 2007 reported a talent crunch in the Business Process Outsourcing industry with respect to soft skill trainers. This industry employs a large section of the youth especially the first job seekers. The crunch or need was realized way back in 2007. Now most organizations and industries especially the targeted sectors have employed at least one 'qualified' trainer who has had some professional training. These are trainers who can provide training to trainees to enable them to communicate in the international marketplace. There is also the need for a proper cultural understanding to be able to interact in a global environment.

The data collected for this study has been from the people who are closely associated with communication and the customer service sector. The first page of the survey consists of the personal profile of the respondents. To give them a level of comfort while responding names were not made mandatory (as shown in Annexure 7). A majority of the respondents were from the age group of 21 years to 29 years. It is at this age that job aspirants seek employment. The graph starts plummeting from age 30 onwards to 49 years of age. The male respondents were also more in number as compared to the female respondents. In terms of educational qualification there are more graduates closely followed by undergraduates. However, there are very few post graduates who are in the customer service sector. Many respondents have a one year experience closely followed by those with less than six months of experience. This is also intentional as trainees and newly recruited respondents were also required. There is also an almost equal number of respondents who have about 4 to 5 years of work experience. More than half the respondents have either completed or undergone a course in business communication. This could be because most companies and organizations make it mandatory to complete a course especially one in communication skills and personality development.

On a five point Likert scale, namely, strongly agree, agree, neutral, disagree, strongly disagree the respondents were asked to rate the questions and
statements provided (as shown in Annexure 8). The following are the derivations from the study conducted by means of statistical methods which is quantitatively.

A large majority of the respondents strongly agree with the statement that the importance of communication skills is being felt widely in the customer service sector. A negligible few only have either taken a neutral stand or disagree with this statement. This question strengthens the need for a study or research to be undertaken in the field of business communication especially dealing with communication skills in the customer service industry. The respondents who have simply agreed to the same statement are the ones who have a face-to-face contact with the customer or client as in the retail sector, travel and tour sector and the hospitality sector.

Most organizations especially the ones used in the sectors selected for this study devise various strategies to obtain the correct customer loyalty index for the organization. This increases their clientele and customer database. The insurance sector in this case relies heavily on the retention of old customers and also the retail sector wherein there is a special concentration now on improving after sales service in order to retain the old customers. It is hence very apparent that a majority of the respondents believe that better communication skills will not only improve customer service but will also retain the old ones. Only a negligible number have either taken a neutral stand or strongly disagreed. These respondents are from upcoming sectors wherein the number of customers or clients are still less in number.

An employee of every sector undergoes some form of training hence, there was no respondent for the extreme scale of strongly disagreeing or of taking a neutral stand. The data for this statement also suggests the same. A majority of the trainees and trainers have strongly agreed to this statement.

Job aspirants who have some form of training in the field of business communication are preferred by employers. Most of the respondents were unanimous in agreeing and strongly agreeing to this statement. Almost all recruiters prefer job applicants to have some previous work experience. In the business sector an extra degree or a certificate in business communication is always welcome.

Customers tend to be dissatisfied, frustrated and irate due to non-functional products or poor service. At that point in time it has been observed that excellent communication skills are required to calm the customer down. It is up to the customer representative to gain the customer's confidence back or to lose it completely.
Trainers, teachers, syllabus & curriculum designers, training module designers have begun incorporating non-verbal communication and have given equal importance to it as they would to verbal communication. Most institutes offering business communication as a subject or course have incorporated personality development programmes in addition to voice and accent training and soft skills training. Almost 92% of the respondents conform to this statement which is a large majority, thereby proving that the statement holds water.

Of late a lot of importance has been attached to non-verbal communication wherein it has also contributed to closing a business deal successfully. Deals are successfully closed only when clients or customers have confidence in the product, service or the company one represents. The right body language, maintaining eye-contact, right posture etc. are some of the non-verbal skills that enable a customer service representative exude confidence. It is usually by virtue of this confidence that a customer or a client decides whether or not to close a deal or continue with availing the services provided by a company or an organization.

One of the keys to success in business communication is the ability to bridge the cultural gap. A wrong word or gesture which is due to the ignorance of the customer's cultural background could have an adverse effect and result in the failure of communication. Most of the respondents have also agreed to the same.

A majority of the respondents responded in favour of the observation that cross cultural training helps equip employees with skills required to do business in a global environment. This shows that there is a strong need for employees to be properly trained in the cultural background of the customer or client. This need stems from a surge in the rising economic status of the country leading to trade and exchange with other countries of the world.

The very fact that not a single respondent strongly disagreed with the observation that expressing empathy is seen as means of assuring a customer shows that the expression of empathy helps in assuring a dissatisfied customer or client who is either upset with a particular product or service.

The observation that the use of facts helps in setting the right expectations to the customer is usually applicable when a product is sold or serviced. A large majority of the respondents agree to this because transparency is evident. The customer is told the truth and hence he or she knows whether the investment is worth it. The customer is also aware about what to expect, hence there is no miscommunication.
Of all the statements so far i.e. politely saying ‘no’ is a negative attribute while trying to close a business deal has had the most varied responses. Very few have responded in the extreme scale of either strongly agreeing or strongly disagreeing. An almost equal number of respondents hover between simply agreeing and disagreeing or simply taking a neutral stand. The statement is simply trying to determine whether or not politely saying ‘no’ to the customer has a negative impact while closing a business deal. One reason for having varied responses could be because this depends entirely on the customer or client, whether or not they are willing to accept ‘no’ for an answer.

A large majority agree that speaking over the phone requires more caution than in a face-to-face interaction. There are many reasons that can be attributed to this observation. It is difficult to know the customer’s or client’s mood over the telephone except through the tone used by the customer or the client. Also the customer or client is judging the speaker only through the speaker’s tone. Based on that the level of caution should be higher while talking over the telephone. A large majority of the respondents support this statement.

A majority of the respondents have agreed that gathering relevant information is a pre-requisite for resolution of problems and also helps in making the right decisions. It is actually considered the starting point of any customer service that is to be provided. Gathering the relevant information will enable the customer service representatives to immediately identify the customer’s or client’s requirements. This will also ensure effective time management resulting in good customer service provided.

Customers or clients wishing to initiate a business deal would first of all do a background check on the organization before they invest, buy or approve. It has been observed that companies or organizations which are financially stable and have unblemished track records almost always close deals successfully. This goes on to show that past records of the company or organization and experiences of other customers or clients do matter in today’s global business environment.

Making assumptions and jumping to conclusions result in misunderstandings and wrong information thereby hindering factual information. The data obtained from the responses of this statement is a very convincing one. It shows that a lot of stress has to be laid on facts rather than assumptions in order to avoid misunderstandings that may arise due to wrong information.
Use of technical jargon or language often leads to disinterest on the part of the listener. Listeners are usually unable to comprehend what the speaker is trying to say as they are unfamiliar with the terms and language used. When there is a lack of interest no business deal can be closed successfully.

The very fact that not a single respondent strongly disagreed that interrupting a customer does result in a failed communication. Every customer wants to be heard and to listen patiently is what is expected of a customer service representative. Interruptions by a customer service representative indicate that what the customer or client is trying to say is unimportant and irrelevant.

The fact that 98.8% of the respondents have agreed that good listening skills result in successful communication emphasizes the point that good listening skills are imperative for the success of any business transaction. Also, there were no respondents who disagreed to this statement which shows that anyone associated with the customer service sector understands the value of listening.

There has to be a proper call flow or conversational flow during the interaction. One needs to listen while the other is speaking and vice versa. Taking turns to speak while communicating ensures a natural rapport building which may not be possible if both are trying to speak at the same time. This is also applicable for written communication. One has to wait for a reply before sending another mail immediately. It would appear as if there is an imposition of some sort.

In the Indian scenario, mother tongue influence or MTI as it is popularly known is considered one of the biggest barriers to communication. This is mainly when an Indian speaker is trying to communicate in English in the international marketplace. There is a great deal of miscommunication as an entire meaning can be changed with only a single mispronunciation of a word. Hence, more than 400 of the respondents have agreed that MTI can indeed be a barrier to communication.

Any communication which is clear right at the onset will not face any hurdle at a later time. The importance of clarity in both speech and writing has been realized in the customer service sector in a very big way. Right from the smallest product or service to the biggest, clarity is essential to maintain trust and thereby retain customers. Writing a mail, explaining a product or a service etc. all these have to be done with clarity so the customer knows exactly what to expect.

Delivering a message either over the phone, in person or via e-mail has to be done with utmost accuracy. The receiver should be able to understand and comprehend
the message immediately. The advantage of being accurate is that it saves time and also creates a good and lasting impression in any customer interaction. Almost 90% of the respondents conform to this statement as being in the customer service sector they realize the advantages of being accurate.

Almost all customers like to feel assured especially when they are buying a product or availing a service. Many a time things go wrong which are not to the customer's liking and it is in these instances or situations that the customers need to feel the most assured. Power words or caring responses like, “I'll handle this for you”, “We’ll have it delivered for you”, “It will be fixed” etc. do help reassure a dissatisfied customer or a passenger in distress. It also eventually helps build a better rapport for future encounters.

The tone usually defines the mood of the speaker. Hence, maintaining the right tone during an entire interaction creates a strong impact on any form of business communication. The use of a rising tone is usually not preferable for customer service as it may appear to be argumentative. A falling tone is usually preferred as it is more reassuring and gives the customer or client an indication of compliance.

Indians in general have a fast rate of speech. Combined with a thick accent and some mother tongue influence, the English spoken could sound completely different and incomprehensible. It has been observed that if a speaker tries to speak with a slower rate of speech there may be some mispronunciations but the listener will still be able to comprehend and understand better. It could be due to this reason that there are no respondents who strongly disagree with this statement.

While communicating especially with customers or clients who are from different social and cultural backgrounds it becomes all the more important for the speaker to frame the sentences in their minds before uttering them. In continuation with the previous statement about rate of speech, a slower rate of speech with enough pauses in between allows a speaker to form thought groups first in the mind before uttering the sentences. The sentences have to be mentally analyzed before any utterance else the sentiments of the customer or client will be hurt or the seeds of doubt may begin to creep into their minds.

In the customer service industry it is necessary to provide alternative solutions to customers or clients to survive in the business and also retain customers. Customers should get the feeling that even if they will not get their requirements from a particular store or company their needs will be taken care of. They expect to be
informed about where to procure their requirements from or where else should they should go to for their requirements.

Without a proper or in depth knowledge of a particular product, process or service it would be very difficult to convince or negotiate with a customer. No amount of persuasion will convince a customer if the customer service representative cannot convince himself or herself first. It is due to this reason that to a very large extent many of the respondents conform to this statement and not a single strongly disagreed to the same.

Persuasion and convincing have been considered key attributes as they are also the most difficult. These are the attributes that set one person apart from the other in the customer service sector. It has been observed that it is usually the top performers of organizations who master these attributes and hence are ahead of the others. These are the refined attributes of soft skills or excellent communication skills.

The art of writing business letters, memos, agenda, and preparation of reports and documentation of minutes are aspects that specific to written communication. Hence, in today's business scenario companies and organizations are no longer seeking voice and accent trainers or voice coaches only they have changed the job profile to communication coach. One of the major reasons for this is because they have realized that writing also forms an integral part of business communication. A communication coach is hence, required to train a trainee on both the aspects of communication, namely the spoken form and the written form.

In the customer service, scenario as in many cases, loyalty is almost synonymous with trust. One way of gaining loyal customers is to win over their trust. This can be done by taking ownership of the product or service sold. Customers' loyalty increase when they can rely more on a follow up call rather than venturing into the market for after sales service. A follow up is required for the simple fact that the customer service representative is in constant contact with the customer and is hence able to update the customer about new products and services and changes in the market. It is also a form of rapport building.

Market trends indicate that our economy relies more heavily on information rather than manufacturing. In this scenario, communication would contribute in a big way to business growth. It is due to this factor that a lot of stress has been laid on communication in the business sector.
Business communication has already been introduced into the curriculum of some of the institutes in Shillong. For those institutes offering commerce as a stream who have not yet introduced business communication into the curriculum should look into the benefits of doing so. Fields like advertising, public relations, marketing etc. require some knowledge in business communication. It would help the students to prepare themselves for further studies or for direct induction into the job market.

There are very few business schools in Shillong and it explains the fluctuation in data. There is no single majority of agreement or disagreement in this scenario. A comprehensive analysis cannot be drawn from this statement as many of the respondents have taken a neutral stand with regard to this statement. In this case it would be difficult to conclude whether or not the teachers of business schools in Shillong are adequately trained. This has been one of the limitations during the course of this study.

Just like the previous statement, for this too, comprehensive conclusions cannot be drawn and inferences cannot be made because of too much fluctuation in responses. In this case, a majority of the respondents have taken a neutral stand. This could be because of the less number of business schools in Shillong and also lack of knowledge about the availability of materials.

If the trainers are themselves well trained, the communication taught to the trainees will be more effective. Trainees look up to the trainers who are well versed with the topic. They prefer trainers who they can learn from and also trainers who not only have the necessary skills but are also able to communicate the same to the trainees or the learners. Communication relies heavily on the practical aspect more than the theoretical hence, it is very important for the trainers to learn the various methods of communication as and when they are developed or upgraded.

A majority of the respondents agree that there should be more institutes offering business communication as a subject in Shillong. Many students planning to pursue a career in the global or international market realize the need for better spoken and written English. Not only do they realize that there is a need for good English but there is also a need for training in other areas of business communication. There are a countable number of institutes in Shillong offering business communication as a subject
and these may not be enough to cater to the needs of the students or the trainees or young recruits who want to pursue a course in business communication.

5.2 Findings and conclusion of the qualitative analysis

In the qualitative analysis of the study a lot of the data was retrieved from personal observation and daily notes taken during my tenure as a voice coach handling all the aspects of communicative skills and communicative training for the customer service sector. The following are the conclusions drawn from the analysis of the data collected over the years and also based on the responses of the respondents of the unstructured interviews:

The first impression is usually the last impression, as the saying goes. Hence, it is the first interaction that defines or sets the tone of any relationship that may follow. Similarly, in the customer service sector it is this first contact that decides whether or not a deal can be struck and also whether it will be a short term deal or a long term one. There can be two types of initial contact with a client. One could be over the telephone and the other could be a face to face contact. In both situations it is important to create a good and lasting impression.

Usually the first contact is over the phone when an appointment is taken with the client. It becomes more important to make the right impression on that first call because both parties cannot see each other. While taking an appointment over the telephone it is very important to first find out if the client is free to talk at the moment. Hence, seeking permission to talk to the client is of utmost importance. Addressing the client in a proper manner is equally important. The tone used should be a falling tone and the pitch should be low. In fact, the tone should be nothing less than friendly and the voice should be interesting. Even if the client is unable to see the other party he or she is able to form an impression of the person on the other end. It is important for the customer to hear a smile in the voice and warmth in the tone. Repeating the business telephone number and inviting the customer to call again is of utmost importance during the interaction.
In a face to face contact, facial expression and body language create a lasting impression especially if it is the first. Eye contact is considered as one of the most vital forms of effective communication. One should always look directly into the eyes of the listener instead of elsewhere to assure the listener that they are interested and that it is not only a job that they are doing. The speaker should ensure that he looks at all the listeners for an equal duration and not only at one individual or at a particular group only. A smile constitutes the most important part of any facial expression when interacting with a customer. In addition to words, the customer is able to form an impression on the basis of body language also. How one shakes hands with the customer or the client also creates an impression. A firm handshake indicates confidence and sincerity and if this can be established at the onset of any form of communication it makes a lasting impression. Ownership of any business communication should be of utmost importance. This involves following up on the business call and in what earnestness it is dealt with. If one is able to express the same earnestness the deal is struck at the initial stage of the conversation. This is because all the customer is looking for is ‘assurance’. Very often it is advisable to use the customer's first name as it increases the level of comfort as the conversation progresses. Thanking the customer is also a very important etiquette that is to be reiterated whenever the need arises during the conversation. Smaller etiquettes like standing when the customer is standing need not be reminded. Offering the customer your business card shows openness for further interactions. Following an appropriate dress code enhances your chances of striking a deal in your favour. Display of good manners and the way you conduct yourself also plays an important role in convincing a listener. Knowledge of current affairs helps the flow of conversation thereby leading to being able to build a good rapport with the listener and also easing the strain and awkwardness of a first meeting. An even stronger knowledge of your subject is highly recommended to be able to assure and convince the listener.

There are two types of customer related issues, namely product related and service related. The kind of initial interaction is the same for both in order to have a successful dialogue and strike a successful deal. There will be several instances where we may have to say ‘no’ to the customer even if it is the first interaction. These are the instances which can sway the customer towards us or away from us. Saying ‘no’ politely is an art that you should master in the customer service industry. Using facts
helps in setting the right expectations to the customer. In the insurance industry it would set the right expectations if the customer was told beforehand that a particular policy would not cover pre-existing medical conditions. Being gentle and yet firm also becomes essential at times while saying 'no' to a customer. In a restaurant which is completely booked and there are absolutely no tables available using the right kind of verbiage helps in making the regular customers understand. Even while selling a product the ability to offer alternatives is of utmost importance for a good and sustained customer service. This can be illustrated in a car showroom where the model required by the customer is unavailable. In such a case, the showroom assistant can say, “We don’t have that model, however, we do have a similar model with all the features of the one that you want at an attractive price.” It is always helpful to remember that the customer looks at us as the company and less as an individual. Hence, it would be better for us not to take it personally if a customer is offended.

The rate of speech of any Indian always tends to be on the faster side. This is usually due to the influence of the mother tongue. So that the listener can understand better or comprehend better we need to slow down the rate of speech. It is here that silence and pauses can be used as effective tools to control the rate of speech. Slightly longer silences draw immediate attention although they should be used thoughtfully and sparingly. Stress and emphasis on certain words and phrases help to highlight the important points in any conversation or presentation.

Credibility is a factor that has been instrumental in clinching deals within a short span of time. Credibility and believability of a speaker are said to be synonymous terms. Researchers speak in terms of initial credibility, derived credibility and terminal credibility. It is not uncommon for someone who starts off with a low credibility to earn increased credibility while speaking and to finish with a much higher terminal credibility. (Ronald B. Adler and George Rodman, 2006). Credibility is always accompanied with a high degree of sincerity.

Body language as mentioned above is a critical factor. It enables a customer to gauge whether you have adequate knowledge of the subject or product that you are trying to sell. Of course this would be irrelevant in case of a telephone conversation. Here you do not need to be concerned about how you look like. The focus is more on what is being said. Positive thoughts however need to be translated into a smile as this
will be reflected in the voice. Relaxing while speaking enables you to create a positive image and in turn reassures the customer thereby making him or her more comfortable. This helps in easing any form of tension in any conversation. Use of technical jargons or language has two negative repercussions. Firstly, it becomes impossible for a layman to understand what is being said and thereby this leads to disinterest. Secondly, it may bring about a feeling of inferiority as the customer may feel that he is unable to understand what is being said due to his own inadequacies. It may not be easily detected if you are lying over the phone however, if you do so your voice rises involuntarily and on the phone this can be easily detected.

It may not seem important however, using the customer’s name occasionally during the course of the conversation helps in building a good rapport. One must also have the ability to gauge the customer’s state of mind. One needs to trust your intuition at times to get verbal clues about the customer’s personality and mood.

Whatever needs to be said has to be done briefly so that it does not become tedious for the listener. Courtesy and politeness are two virtues that have to be maintained at all times irrespective of the customer’s mood and temperament. You need to be resourceful as the client feels good if he knows that you have better knowledge than he does. Speaking clearly and slowly enables you to speak correctly and accurately. These are certain points that need to be remembered in order to be able to create a good and a lasting impression.

The importance of writing skills cannot be undermined. Almost every business transaction today has some written form. Hence, it has become equally important to stress on developing good written skills as well.

Designing training kits or modules are completely need based. In the customer service industry modules on communicative skills are usually designed based on the feedback of the customer. The weak areas are identified and the modules are accordingly developed to correct and also to improve the communicative skills in this sector. Most of the factors identified as necessary for training have been covered in the questionnaire and these are also taken into account while designing the materials. Each of the questions or statements in the questionnaire is enough for a particular topic for discussion or training.
5.3 Suggestions for Further Research

In this study, there were only a few industries and sectors which were touched upon. A similar study on other sectors or industries like the automobile industry, the aviation industry and other upcoming fast track industries is highly recommended. Also as discussed in the scope of study in Chapter III, the retail industry is coming up in a big way and so also all the other related fields associated with it. The Indian retail industry being the fifth largest in the world has a huge scope and potential and as it is associated with various related fields, it has ample scope for further research. Another important factor is the proposal for Foreign Direct Investments (FDI) which if it becomes a reality will again provide further scope for research and study.

Although statistical methods have been used for the quantitative analysis of the study another method that can be applied is the chi-square test. The use of structured interviews can also help in attaining uniformity in the way that respondents respond to the questions.

This study has so far looked at communicative skills from the customer's point of view. During the course of the study it became apparent that even the internal customers need to be taken care of. Also while interviewing students and teachers of various institutes which offer business communication as a subject, it has been observed that there is indeed another factor which is considered very important while dealing with not only the external customers but also the internal customers. This factor is personality development. Right at the onset of business communication that is at the business school level personality development has been given due importance. The curriculum of such schools would invariably incorporate personality development as a separate subject. Similarly for internal customers or the employees of an organization emphasis has been laid on personality development for the purpose of appearing for internal job postings or promotions. Hence, a study on communicative skills with emphasis on personality development would make a good topic for further research.

Another study could perhaps look into the designing of training modules of developing of training materials in the field of communicative skills in the customer service industry.
A study such as the above could indeed benefit not only the customer service representatives but teacher trainers and teachers in general, curriculum planners and material designers in particular.