
Call Center Executives' Listening Behavior and Customers' Intention to Call

Dr. Amit Jain

Associate Professor,
JK Laxmipat University,
Jaipur.

amit_pjain@yahoo.com

Tejas Shah

Lecturer,
Shri Chimanbhai Patel
Institute of Management
& Research, Ahmedabad.

tejasgmt27@gmail.com

The study uses three dimensions to judge perceived listening behavior, i.e., attentiveness, perceptiveness and responsiveness and its outcome variables trust, satisfaction and customers' intention to call again. The study collected responses of 153 public and private sectors' call center customers. The data was analyzed using two sample Z-test and regression analysis to test the hypothesized relationship. All three components of listening behavior have significant effect on satisfaction and trust except responsiveness dimension on satisfaction. The combined effect of all the three components of listening behavior was found to be significant on satisfaction and trust. It was found that the repeated satisfied interactions help building trust amongst customers, which creates a base for maintaining long term relationship and intention to call again to the same call center.

Keywords Listening Behavior, Satisfaction, Attentiveness, Perceptiveness, Responsiveness, Trust.

Companies commit a great deal of time and resources on customer satisfaction. Delivering superior service and ensuring higher customer satisfaction have become strategic necessities for companies to survive in competitive business environment (Reichheld & Sasser, 1990).

Customer call centers have emerged as an important tool for providing higher customer satisfaction. Companies use call centers for establishing direct communication with their customers. Call centers are increasingly playing a crucial role in customer relationship management. Most business organizations see call center services as a potentially effective way of keeping customers happy and satisfied, and gaining a competitive advantage.

However, it is widely argued that in reality call centers have failed to realize their actual potential in helping organizations achieve the goals of providing high levels of customer satisfaction. Several studies provide ample evidence on severe customer dissatisfaction with call center services. A study conducted by the Citizens' Advice Bureaux found that 97 per cent customers cringed

at the thought of using a call center number, 90 per cent of them had complaints, and 40 per cent were totally dissatisfied (The Times of India, 2004). A study conducted by Jaiswal (2008) found that service quality management in call centers disregards customers. Customer orientation in service management is either low or absent in most call centers. Call centers lack comprehensive and systematic measurement of service quality in order to provide a superior call center experience to their customers. The fact that most call centers have failed to contribute effectively towards the aim of achieving customer satisfaction indicates that there is a significant gap in our understanding of just what makes a satisfied customer in call center operations.

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A Study of Citizens' Advice Bureaux

Call center industry in India

The call center industry has emerged as one of the fastest growing sectors in India. According to a NASSCOM (2006) study, the IT enabled services – business process outsourcing (BPO) industry earned revenue of US\$ 5.2 billion in 2005. Call centers are most prominent among BPO firms. Indian call centers provide both inbound and outbound services. Generally, in inbound services, calls originate at the customer's end

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whereas in outbound services, call centers initiate contacts with customers for specific purposes. Inbound call services involve handling customer calls for receiving orders, making reservations, resolving customer complaints, and providing after sales service. Outbound services involve direct selling activities, conducting marketing research surveys, and managing public relations. The Indian call center industry is highly competitive but there is a shortage of workforce with the required skills.

The industry is marred with a high-employee attrition rate which leads to high training and development costs as well as inefficient customer services. There is a need to offer superior service quality and achieving high levels of customer satisfaction for survival and growth of call center organizations.

Service Quality

Service quality has been studied using several models. First, Gronroos (1984) used a two-dimensional model to study service quality. The first dimension is Technical Quality that refers to the outcome of the service performance. The second dimension is Functional Quality that refers to the subjective perception of how the service is delivered. Later, McDougall and Levesque (1994) added a third dimension - physical environment to Gronroos' (1984) model and proposed the Three Factor Model of Service Quality. Based on these traditional definitions of service quality, Parasuraman, Zeithaml & Berry (1988) developed "Gap Model" of service quality, which conceptualizes the perception of

service quality as the difference between expected level of service and the actual service perception. Replications of the original SERVQUAL study have been done in various contexts in India as well as abroad.

Customer satisfaction and service quality in call centers:

Literature review

There is a difference between service encounters occurring in call centers and other conventional service organizations such as restaurants, banks and hospitals. In call centers, service encounters that customer interacts with through telephone. This is different from face-to-face encounters that employees and center service firms. In telephonic encounters, tangible factors do not contribute to service quality evaluations. Customers play a less active role and verbal cues assume high importance. Because of these inherent characteristics of telephonic encounters, call center agents directly affect service quality.

Customers hold certain expectations about their prospective voice-to-voice interactions with call center representatives. Since these expectations are

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certain expectations prospective voice-to-voice interactions with call center representatives. Since these expectations are

likely to determine how customers evaluate the quality of the service firm, it is in the

service firm's interest to know what these expectations are. For consumers, the evaluation of a service often depends on the evaluation of the "service encounter" or the time when the customer interacts with the firm. Quality, in this context, is the net aggregate value of benefits perceived in the service encounter over what the customer had been expecting (Burgers, Ruyter, Keen & Streukens, 2000).

Customer satisfaction and service quality have been defined by marketing researchers in different ways. Oliver (1997, p. 28) defined satisfaction as "the consumer's fulfillment response, the degree to which the level of fulfillment is pleasant or unpleasant". Zeithaml, Berry & Parasuraman (1996) defined customer satisfaction as the "customers' evaluation of a product or service in terms of whether that product or service has met their needs and expectations". In marketing literature several studies have found positive relationships of service quality and customer satisfaction with customer behavioral intentions (Parasuraman et al., 1988). Further, studies have also shown that customer satisfaction mediates the effect of service quality on behavioral intentions (Gotlieb, Grewal, & Brown, 1994).

The economic benefits of ensuring a high level of customer satisfaction are immense. Several studies have shown the positive relationship of customer satisfaction and service quality with customer loyalty (Cronin & Taylor, 1992; Oliver, 1980; Parasuraman et al., 1988). Providing superior service to customers through call centers can be extremely important for organizations from the long-term objective of customer retention.

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Components of Listening Behavior

Listening has been defined as “a set of interrelated activities, including apparent attentiveness, non-verbal behavior, verbal behavior, perceived attitudes, memory and behavioral responses (Lewis & Reinsch, 1988). Ruyter & Wetzel (2000) found that listening is a complex, affective and cognitive behavioral activity consisting of a number of distinct behavioral manifestations.

Michaels & Day (1985) found that customers are the actual observers of salesperson behaviors, and their perceptions should be evaluated. Brownell (1990) found that the perception of effective listening is vital and it is manifested by behaviors, even though it is an internal process. Anderson & Martin (1995) found three components of listening behavior: attentiveness, perceptiveness and responsiveness. Similarly, Ramsey & Sohi

Three components of listening behavior: attentiveness, perceptiveness and responsiveness

(1997) found that listening is a higher-order construct consisting of three dimensions: sensing, evaluating and responding. Ruyter & Wetzel (2000) also replicated three components of listening behavior in their study.

Attentiveness is defined as the extent to which customers receive verbal and nonverbal cues from call center agents during telephone service interaction (Ruyter & Wetzel, 2000). Ramsey & Sohi, (1997) defined it in terms of sales person’s ability of actually hearing or sensing incoming stimuli from the customer, which could be verbal or nonverbal such as words, tone of voice, gestures, etc.. Verbal cues consist of language stimuli, enabling listeners to give consideration, while non verbal cues reflect the occurrence of what has been called paralanguage, which includes vocal qualities, vocalization and voice segregates. Verbal cues carry a large part of a message’s cognitive content, whereas nonverbal cues reflect affective commitment and involvement (Ruyter & Wetzel, 2000).

Perceptiveness is mainly a cognitive activity, which reflects the listener's attempt to understand the message by the assigning a meaning to the verbal and nonverbal message (Ruyter & Wetzel, 2000). Ramsey & Sohi (1997) defined perceptiveness in terms of evaluations, which requires a salesperson not only to focus on the message, but also assess such facts as buying motives, buying style, buyer's communication skills and possible objections, as well as determine if the appropriate buying situation knowledge exists in memory.

Responsiveness indicates the level of understanding or agreement between the call center agent and the customer (Ruyter & Wetzel, 2000). Ramsey & Sohi (1997) postulate that the purpose of responding may be, to inform, control, share feelings or ritualize. Customers get a feeling that the salesperson is responding appropriately to the conversation when he or she answers at appropriate times, shows eagerness, offers relevant information to the questions asked and tries to answer in full sentences rather than just saying 'yes' or 'no'.

Outcome of call center executive's listening behavior

The two outcomes possible of executives' listening behavior are trust and satisfaction. Trust indicates the confident belief on the part of the customer that the call center agent can be relied on to behave in such a manner that the long-term interest of the customer can be served (Ruyter & Wetzel, 2000). Morgan & Hunt (1994) defined trust as existing when one party has confidence in an exchange partner's reliability and integrity. Moorman, Deshpande, & Gerald (1993) defined trust as a willingness to rely on an exchange partner in whom one has confidence. Rotter (1967) defined trust as a generalized expectancy held by an individual that the word of another can be relied on. So the willingness to act is implicit in the conceptualization of trust. Schurr & Ozanne (1985) found trust to be central to the process of achieving cooperative problem-solving and constructive dialogue.

Satisfaction is achieved when perception meets or exceeds the expectation (Ruyter & Wetzel, 2000). A customer's satisfaction reflects an emotional state that occurs in response to an evaluation of the interaction experience that the customer has with the salesperson (Crosby & Evans, 1990). Anderson & Martin (1995) defined that if customer needs are met, they would be satisfied and if these needs are not met, they are likely to be dissatisfied with their experience. When a customer is satisfied with a supplier, it also means that they know that the supplier is able to deliver what is expected, and thus the perceived risk associated with choosing a familiar supplier (who fulfills expectations) is less than the perceived risk associated with choosing an unfamiliar supplier, or a familiar supplier who has not met expectations in previous experiences (Churchill & Surprenant, 1982; Oliver, 1980). Satisfaction has frequently been conceptualized as an immediate response to consumption.

“Satisfaction and trust have a positive impact on customer’s intention to contact the call center again in the future”

Call intention represents the desire of the customer to use services of the same call center in the future (Ruyter & Wetzel, 2000).

Ramsey & Sohi (1997)

defined call intention in terms of anticipation of future interaction. Low expectation of future interaction would be an outgrowth of current relational problems, whereas high expectations of future interaction would reflect a favorable perception of the current relationship (Kellerman, 1987). Nugent (1992) indicated that listening creates a positive impact on clients and has a positive affective influence on the practitioner-client relationship.

Conceptual framework-Interrelationships amongst variables

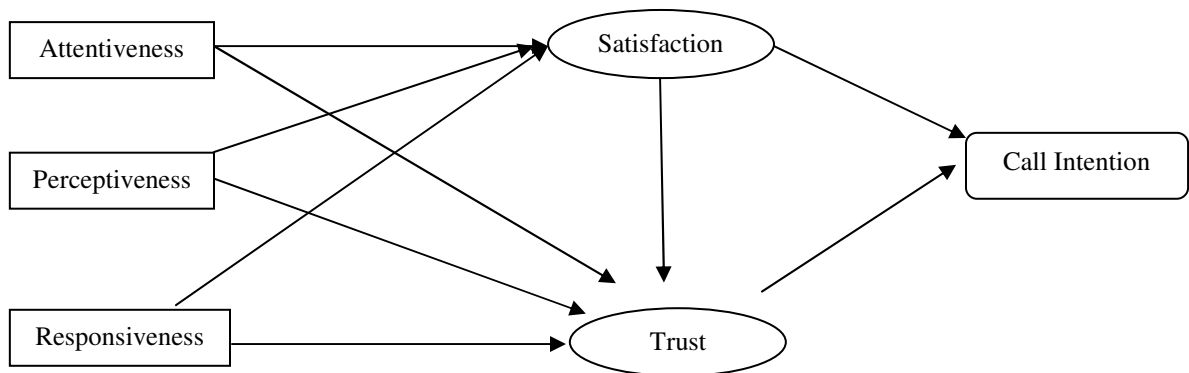
Anderson & Martin (1995) found a positive association between satisfaction and different components of listening behavior in the context of group communication behavior. Ramsey & Sohi (1997) found that a salesperson must engage in all three kinds of behaviors (sensing, evaluating and responding) to be perceived as an effective listener.

Selnes (1998) defined satisfaction as an evaluation of an outcome compared to some norm. He found that communication (listening behavior) was expected to be an important source for satisfaction because it could lead to a shared understanding of performance outcome and expectations (or norms). Churchill & Surprenant (1982) and Oliver (1980) found confirmation/disconfirmation theory, which predicted that satisfaction was achieved when expectations were fulfilled (confirmed), that negative disconfirmation of expectations would result in dissatisfaction, and that positive disconfirmation would result in enhanced satisfaction. A common definition of trust is that it is a “generalized expectance” of how the other party will behave in the future. (Moorman et al., 1993 and Rotter, 1967). Morgan & Hunt (1994) tested that communication between a customer and firm representatives might increase trust by resolving disputes and streamlining the satisfaction formation process by aligning perceptions and expectations. So, communication was an essential antecedent of satisfaction and trust in buyer-seller relationships. Ruyter & Wetzel (2000) defined “satisfaction” as an immediate response to consumption and “trust” as a more long-term relationship characteristic. A number of researchers have argued that the importance of trust came because of the difficulty or impossibility of acquiring information about future events or defining a contract that covers such future events (Bradach & Eccles, 1989; Macauley, 1963). Ravald & Gronroos (1996) found that satisfaction was an important source of trust. Satisfaction is a manifestation of the other party’s ability to meet relational norms and thus marked trust. Selnes (1998) also found satisfaction as a strong antecedent of trust.

“Satisfaction was achieved when expectations were fulfilled (confirmed), that negative disconfirmation of expectations would result in dissatisfaction, and that positive disconfirmation would result in enhanced satisfaction”

Satisfaction with delivered products and services had affected the buyer's decision to continue a relationship (Fornell, 1992) and the likelihood that they would exit from the relationship and spread negative word-of-mouth (Richins, 1983 and Singh, 1988). Crosby et al. (1990) found that customer satisfaction with the seller would affect the relationship quality. Morgan and hunt (1994) found that if the buyer trusted the seller, he or she will be more inclined to work with the same seller again. Selnes (1998) found trust and satisfaction as important antecedents of relationship continuity and enhancement. He found that if the buyer is not satisfied, trust would be reduced and a willingness to develop the relationship might not exist. Ramsey & Sohi (1997) also found that a customer's anticipation of future interaction with a salesperson depends on the level of trust and satisfaction with that salesperson. Ruyter & Wetzel (2000) also found that satisfaction and trust had a positive impact on customer's intention to contact the call center again in the future.

Proposed Interrelationships



Need for the study

The nature of marketing services and products is changing with more focus on mass customization and individual responsiveness. An interactive paradigm has suddenly become a reality. An increasing number of firms have installed call centers as communication platforms to integrate services and sales functions in dealing with large

numbers of distant customers. These units primarily process inbound and outbound communications with customers and prospects and help to build relationships. With the degree of voice-to-voice encounters incrementally increasing, it is important to understand listening behavior of call center agents and its impact on customer-firm relationships.

Objectives of the study

1. To explore the importance of components of call center executive's listening behavior
2. To measure customer's perception of call-center employees' listening behavior
3. To define the relationship among the components of listening behavior and outcome variables i.e. satisfaction, trust and call intention

Method

Participants

The sample was drawn using non-probability convenience sampling method. In total, 153 customers were surveyed for the study, out of which 76 customers were using private sector cellular service provider firm's service and 77 customers were using public sector cellular service provider firm's service. All the respondents are above 18 years and had frequent interactions with call center employees in Ahmedabad.

Materials

A structured questionnaire was used, having close-ended questions. The questionnaire contained the components of listening behavior (Attentiveness, perceptiveness and responsiveness) and consequences of listening behavior (trust, satisfaction and call intention) (Ruyter and Wetzel, 2000), with multi-item measures. Respondents were asked to rank each item on Likert-type scale ranging from 1 (completely disagree) to 5

(completely agree). Some questions were negatively framed and were reverse scored to detect response bias.

Procedure

The questionnaire was administered through personal interaction with the respondents.

Results

Reliability test was conducted using Cronbach alpha measurement for listening behavior dimension (attentiveness, perceptiveness and responsiveness), consequences of listening behavior (trust and satisfaction) and call intention. Mean analysis was conducted to find out the difference between the customers' perceptions about public sector telecom companies and private sector telecom companies' call centers' executive listening behavior and their impact on customers' intention to call in future. Regression analysis was conducted to define the degree of relationship among various dimensions of the model.

Reliability Analysis

Table 1

Particulars	Cronbach Alpha
Components of Listening Behavior (Attentiveness, Perceptiveness & Responsiveness)	0.707
Outcome Variable of Listening Behavior (Trust & Satisfaction)	0.715
Call Intention	0.622

The Cronbach alpha was used to conduct a reliability test, to check the consistency of the constructs. The reliability of the listening behavior dimension is found to be significant at 0.707. The reliability of outcome variable of listening behavior is also high at 0.715, while the reliability of call intention dimension is moderately high at 0.622 (Hair, Black, Babin, Anderson & Tatham, 2009).

Mean Analysis

Table 2

No.	Statements	Overall	Private sector Cellular Service Provider Firm	Public Sector Cellular Service Provider Firm	Z test (Indicates Mean Difference is Significant at 95% C.L.)
D1	Attentiveness	3.89	3.94	3.83	1.0581
F1	The agent did not make an attentive impression*	3.84	3.97	3.70	
F2	The agent used short, affirmative words and sounds to indicate that s/he was really listening.	3.93	3.91	3.96	
D2	Perceptiveness	3.88	3.89	3.87	0.2237
F3	The agent asked for more details and extra information during the conversation.	3.93	3.89	3.96	
F4	The agent continually attempted to understand what I was saying.	3.82	3.84	3.81	
F5	The agent paraphrased what had been said adequately.	3.89	3.92	3.86	
D3	Responsiveness	3.73	3.73	3.73	0
F6	The agent offered relevant information to the question I asked.	3.76	3.83	3.69	
F7	The agent used full sentences in his or her answer instead of just saying yes or no.	3.67	3.57	3.77	
F8	The agent did not recognize what	3.77	3.80	3.74	

	information I needed.*				
D4	Trust	3.48	3.63	3.32	3.32^s
F9	I believe that his company takes customer calls seriously.	3.63	3.89	3.36	
F10	I feel that this company does not respond to customer problems with understanding.*	3.02	2.72	3.31	
F11	This company is ready and willing to offer support to customers.	3.59	3.87	3.31	
F12	I can count on this company to be sincere.	3.67	4.05	3.30	
D5	Satisfaction	3.71	3.86	3.56	3.14^s
F13	I am satisfied with the level of service the agent provided.	3.65	3.87	3.43	
F14	I am satisfied with the way I was spoken to by the agent.	3.80	3.80	3.81	
F15	I am satisfied with the information I got from the agent	3.76	3.96	3.56	
F16	The telephone call with this agent was a satisfying experience.	3.63	3.82	3.44	
D6	Call Intention	3.47	3.64	3.30	3.71^s
F17	I will most likely contact this company again.	3.65	3.72	3.58	
F18	Next time I have any question I will not hesitate to call again.	3.46	3.66	3.26	
F19	I would not be willing to discuss problems I have with this company over the phone.*	3.30	3.55	3.05	

(Note: * negatively phrased item)

As shown in the above table, the customers are more satisfied with the services of private cellular service firms than the public sector cellular service firms. Their rating of private sector cellular service provider firm's call center executive was higher than the public sector cellular service provider firm's call center executive for satisfaction, trust and call intention. The difference was found to be statistically significant. Although the difference in perception of respondents regarding the three components of listening behavior of executives of public and private sector call centers was not found to be significant. The customers are also more satisfied and having more trust on private sector call center executives' services than public sector call center executives' services. Public sector cellular service firm's customers have shown less interest to contact call center executives than that of private sector cellular service firm's customers. Thus, hierarchical relationship among antecedents and consequences of listening behavior is difficult to establish.

Regression Analysis

Table 3: Coefficient correlations of independent variables

	Attentiveness	Perceptiveness	Responsiveness
Attentiveness	1	0.467	0.344
Perceptiveness	0.467	1	0.470
Responsiveness	0.344	0.470	1

Table 4: Regression Coefficients

	Attentiveness	Perceptiveness	Responsiveness	Listening Behaviour
Trust	0.0268*	0.001*	0.012*	0.000*
VIF Statistics	1.312	1.486	1.317	1.000
Satisfaction	0.05*	0.000*	0.075	0.000*
VIF Statistics	1.312	1.486	1.317	1.000

(* Significant at 0.05 level of significance)

Table 5: Coefficient correlations among independent variables

	Trust	Satisfaction
Trust	1	0.581
Satisfaction	0.581	1

Table 6: Regression Coefficients

	Satisfaction	Trust
Call Intention	0.201	0.000*
VIF Statistics	1.509	1.509

(* Significant at 0.05 level of significance)

Table 7: Regression Coefficients

	Satisfaction
Trust	0.000*
VIF Statistics	1.000

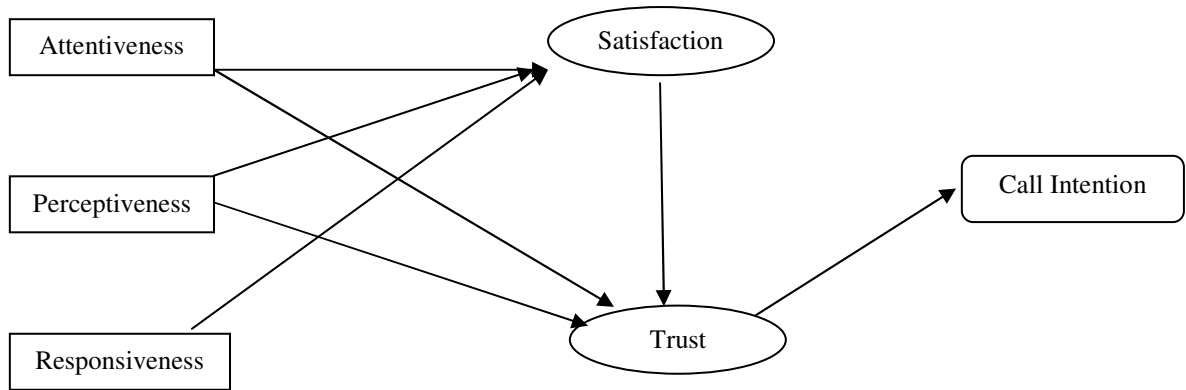
(* Significant at 0.05 level of significance)

From the matrix of correlations placed in table 3 and 5, it is revealed that none of the independent variables has the coefficient larger than 0.7. The VIF statistics placed at the table are also very much within limits. Hence there is no cause of concern from the viewpoint of multi collinearity amongst the independent variables. (Hair, Black, Babin, Anderson & Tatham, 2009)

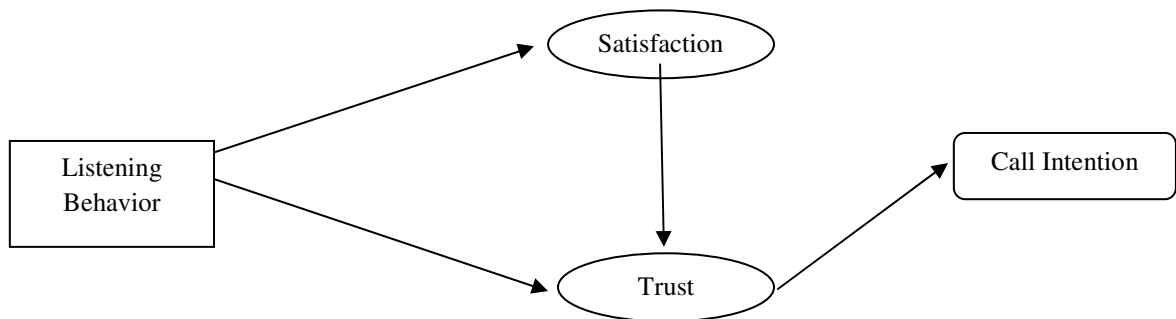
Regression analysis was done to check the effect of the three components of listening behavior, i.e., attentiveness, perceptiveness and responsiveness on their consequences, i.e., trust, satisfaction and call intention. As can be seen from table 4, all the three components of listening behaviour have significant effect on satisfaction and trust except responsiveness dimension on satisfaction. The combined effect of all the three components of listening behaviour was found to be significant on satisfaction and trust.

Call intention was assumed to be the outcome variable of satisfaction and trust. The regression analysis showed that there is a significant effect of trust on call intention, but the effect of satisfaction on call intention was not found to be significant (Table 6). It was found that there was a significant effect of satisfaction on trust (Table 7).

Relationship between components of listening behavior and its outcome



Combined effect



Thus, it can be inferred that when satisfaction leads to trust, it gets converted into future call intention from customers. It can be said that trust is a more important consequence of listening behavior leading to call intention. It is consistent with the findings of Selnes (1998) that even though satisfaction and trust are closely connected, they are expected to have different antecedents and consequences. These findings are in contrast to the findings of Brownell (1990), who found satisfaction as one of the important factors in building long term relationship with customers.

Conclusion

The customers are more satisfied with the services of private cellular service firms than the public sector cellular service firms. The reliability test conducted to check the consistency of latent constructs was found to be significant. The correlation and regression results between components of listening behavior and its consequences were found to be significant. Perceptiveness was found to be the most important component of listening behavior affecting the outcome variables, i.e. satisfaction and trust. It can also be inferred that repeated satisfaction leads to building trust in customers, which creates the base for maintaining a long term relationship and an intention to call again at the same call center.

Implications and direction for future research

Listening proves to be an important variable in communication for voice-to-voice service encounters. This paper has explored the importance to attentiveness, perceptiveness and responsiveness as effective components to focus on, by the call center executives and supervisors. It requires call center executives to focus on customer needs, acquire knowledge and customized communication. Future research can be directed towards defining more precisely the various latent constructs of listening behavior and their consequences. A further analysis can be done by increasing the number of samples. Further, various antecedents and consequences of trust and satisfaction can be found to precisely define the interrelationship among various components of the model.

“Repeated satisfaction leads to build trust in customers, which creates the base for maintaining long term relationship and intention to call again in the same call center”

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