

Hosmer Luncheon Series / October 13, 2009

Priscilla S. Rogers, Law, History and Communication
Managing Call Centers: The Role of Courtesy

Call center agents are expected to communicate courteously. However, some argue that courtesy is irrelevant as long as the customer's concern is addressed. Since calls are between strangers, brief, and not sustained over time, it's impossible for an agent to build a relationship with a customer anyway, isn't it? This research in an after-market call center (involving shadowing and interviewing agents; coding and analyzing calls) suggests that some types of responses associated with courtesy actually allow an agent to partner with customers, achieving good results. These "solidarity responses" tend to be more linguistically challenging than the social niceties agents are taught to display. But our data also suggest that solidarity responses differ from the manipulative "strategic responses" detailed in politeness theory. They appear to give agents freedom to engage in real rather than contrived conversations. We theorize that solidarity responses may enhance customer relationships with the organizations the call centers agents serve.