



Use of Language in Developing a Consistent  
Customer Experience across Technology Platforms

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## ***Where and why inconsistencies exist***

The proliferation of new wireless technologies and devices and the perceived potential of the mobile market have stimulated development of customer service across a range of technology platforms, moving from Web and interactive phone services to mobile Palm, Windows CE, mobile phone applications, and simple interactive text services. In this complex environment of constantly changing technologies and devices, it is often difficult to evaluate the customer experience across all of these — the *cross-channel* customer experience.

One of the most critical components of the cross-channel customer experience is how you use language - how you and your systems communicate with customers online. Does communication to your customers about your brand and services vary from your Web site to your interactive telephone system to your mobile Palm application?

Many times, different product managers are responsible for each system or service — and often they are in different departments of the company. In addition, various outside vendors may have been contracted for product and services design and development without much interaction between them and your staff.

Insufficient interaction between design and development groups often results in poor customer- service integration between various self-service channels. Whether or not back-ends are feeding off the same databases of information, if front-ends for each technology channel are not planned as a cohesive unit, customers' overall experience of your company and its information systems — and of your brand identity — will be inconsistent and disjointed.

Areas of customer-service inconsistency in self-service channels may include:

- How the customer is addressed
- How much the system knows about the customer
- How the system refers to itself in an interaction
- How the system refers to the company's business

In call centers and stores, customer service representatives are trained to provide consistent customer service. But when self-service channels are developed, the consistency of the customer experience across channels can be ignored— except, that is, by all the customers who use these self-service channels to interact with your company every day.

## ***Language – the overlooked component***

This white paper focuses on the use of language — or linguistics — which is often overlooked in the development of online brands and self-service. And yet language is the one element that exists across all self-service channels.

What else besides language is a common element among the following technologies?

- Web
- PC applications
- Mobile phones
- Pagers
- Interactive telephone systems
- Public space kiosks or ATMs
- Mobile Palm or other PDA devices

## ***Why ports don't work***

In the interest of efficiency, IT departments often attempt to automate or "port" (bring information or functionality) from one device to another — for instance to a smaller device such as to mobile phones or PDAs. Attempts to port information or functionality between technology channels usually fail miserably.

Ports don't work. Period. Or they work about as well as putting a Tolstoy novel on stage...that is to say, poorly.

Porting failures are due to several problems:

- Awkward formatting and display of information on small screens, even when all graphics are stripped out
- Inappropriate choice of functionality from one medium to another- for example, building complex transactions such as sales applications for mobile phones
- Pulling the wrong textual elements from the initial application

It is misguided to assume that technology alone can solve the problems of taking information and functions from one system and moving it to another. It's not that language can't be stored centrally — it's that only certain elements of an entire system should be treated as "core" language elements. Core language elements are the critical information-display components of a database — for example, account information, customer name, service dates, or preferences.

Optimization of applications is best achieved when some design customization is done for each delivery device. To create an optimal customer experience on a wide variety of devices, presentation of information and functionality must be device-appropriate. Careful use of core language components on each device is especially important.

## ***Creating a cross-platform language strategy***

When designing cross-channel applications that deliver consistent, superior customer experience across all channels, which approach should you take? What multiple-technology strategy should you use?

You can create an effective cross-platform language strategy for self-service channels by paying attention to several linguistic elements that are part of the interactive self-service experience. These include general interactive elements such as user-interface metaphor, point of view, and interaction style.

### **1. User-Interface Metaphor**

How do you determine a user-interface metaphor? Ask yourself this question: Are my self-service systems representing a person, place, or thing? It is helpful to choose a user-interface metaphor for self-service applications because this metaphor will drive all other design elements and create a cohesive framework for all development.

You may find that currently several metaphors are used throughout your organization. For example, your interactive voice response system may use one metaphor, your web site another, and your wireless devices yet a third.

For the greatest cohesiveness across your self-service channels, *choose a single metaphor and stick with it.*

Using a person as your metaphor for a customer-service system holds up well across technology platforms. It works because your automated interactions with your customers can be modeled after interactions between your top (or at least idealized) company representative — whether an agent, broker, customer-service representative, or concierge. Using such person as a metaphor for your systems is also the easiest way to create a personality for your cross-channel experience and online brand.

As an example, a model for a mobile phone application might be the conscientious, helpful representative who phones the customer to let him know when something's available: "I can get you the theater tickets you were interested in...do you still want them?"

Using a consistent user-interface metaphor to model all your systems will help you develop and maintain your point of view and voice — and will make your customers feel comfortable because they know who they're talking to and what to expect.

## 2. Point of View

The user-interface metaphor is the groundwork for the next element — point of view. How do your systems address your customers? Are you using first-person singular or first-person plural? Does your point of view reference the organization, or is it more neutral? Your point of view will impact how your customers perceive you.

*A first-person singular point of view* is our top choice when using the person-as-metaphor for system design. It most closely resembles an actual conversation with a friendly, helpful customer-service representative. This approach goes a long way to making your customers feel comfortable and in motivating them to use your interactive systems.

*First person plural* is by far a more common point of view. It must be used carefully since it may create an atmosphere of distance between the system and your customer. In particular, error messages must be carefully written when using "we," or you risk making users feel it's "me versus them"—which can seriously alienate your customers.

Here's a typical example of how the use of "we" can distance your customer from you. Your online customer has just entered a customer number to locate a customer record, and she receives this message on-screen:

***Sorry, we don't have a file in our records for the customer number you entered.***

However, the first-person singular point of view softens and personalizes an error message because there's a dialogue between her and the system. The same response "reads" differently to the customer who is online with the problem:

***I'm sorry, but I can't find the file for the customer number you gave me.***

*Neutral point-of-view.* A neutral voice is sometimes a better choice than first-person plural, because the "corporate we" is not inserted into the conversation. . Additionally, if your metaphor does not

involve a person (for example, it's a store), you may find the neutral point of view may work for you.

The risk in using a neutral point of view is that it can frequently veer towards an overly technical or computer-oriented language style. Neutral voices are best when they employ simple language, and active, verb-oriented sentences.

Following the examples above, a neutral style would employ this type of language:

***There's no file here for the customer number you entered.***

### **3. Interaction Style**

Tone of voice and overall language style in each interactive system impact how customers perceive your organization.

Pay attention to these issues:

*How much industry jargon or terminology are you using?* Are you using terms only company employees would know or understand? Self-referential language style is stressful to customers because they may be confused or feel ignorant. Use common terms or explain your terms sufficiently for a layman's knowledge level.

*How are you addressing the customer?* Using a customer's name as a greeting is an effective way to welcome customers and communicate that you value them. Whether by first name, last name and title, or first and last name together, people like to be recognized. Does each system recognize and greet your customers?

*How personalized is your interaction?* The more you reflect back to the customer information s/he has given you, the greater the bond you will forge with that customer.

Do a self-diagnosis of the current interaction style for each of your self-service systems. Then, compare them to the interaction styles of your full-service channels — your stores, call centers, or wherever you service your customers.

Decide what kind of tone of voice best represents your online brand and image.

Effective customer-service styles are: Polite, friendly, warm, cheerful, sophisticated, knowledgeable, fast, efficient, or helpful.

## ***The importance of style standards***

Once developed, the style standards that emerge should be defined and put into written style guides for cross-platform technology development. Style guides can include:

- Business terms and terminology (what to use, what to avoid)
- How to address customers
- Display of customer information
- Common phraseology
- Platform-specific suggestions for wording
- Plentiful examples from each channel

These style guides should be distributed across all groups designing and developing systems — including internal and external team members.

Keeping a small core of editors or writer/designers on staff is an efficient way to achieve consistency across channels as the number of self-service applications grows. At a minimum, a senior editor should be on staff to review design work to maintain consistency and ensure a better customer experience across all channels.

## ***Summing up***

Establishing and maintaining a rapport with your customers is essential to gaining and keeping them. Customers need to feel comfortable interacting with your company at all points of contact—in your stores, talking to representatives at call centers, and especially with your self-service channels.

Consistency in your interactions with your customers is the key to making customers feel comfortable doing business with you. Customers always need to know what to expect from you, and they must feel that you respect them and value their business enough to make all experiences with you helpful and pleasant.

Employing the core-language techniques described above when designing and developing each of your self-service channels will go a long way in establishing a cohesive cross-channel brand identity and in creating a consistent, efficient and pleasurable self-service experience for your customers.

## ***About the authors***

Meryl Enerson – founder of Enervision Media - has been an interface designer, producer, and consultant since the early 80's. She has developed consumer as well as enterprise applications for such clients as United Airlines, AT&T, McKinsey, Citibank, Prodigy, United Parcel Service, Jupiter Communications, and Morgan Stanley. She is a specialist in improving ease of use on any technology platform, including web, wireless, Windows, broadband, interactive telephony, and small screen devices.  
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