

Emoticons may signal better customer service

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Smiley

Online customer service agents who use emoticons and who are fast typists may have a better chance of putting smiles on their customers' faces during business-related text chats, according to researchers.

In a study, people who text chatted with customer service agents gave higher scores to the agents who used emoticons in their responses than agents who did not use emoticons, said S. Shyam Sundar, Distinguished Professor of Communications and co-director of the Media Effects Research Laboratory. The customers also reported that agents who used emoticons were more personal than agents who used a profile picture with their responses.

According to Sundar, while emoticons may seem too casual or even too

silly to play a role in formal communications, the study shows that they can play an important role in professional and business communications.

"The emoticon is even more powerful than the picture, though classic research would say that the richer the modality—for instance, pictures and videos—the higher the [social presence](#)," said Sundar, who worked with Eun Kyung Park, a researcher at Sungkyunkwan University in South Korea. "But the fact that the emoticon came within the message and that this person is conveying some type of emotion to customers makes customers feel like the agent has an emotional presence."

Customers prefer customer service agents who can demonstrate their empathy over agents who do not, said Park.

"Emoticons can be effective vehicles for expression of empathy in customer relations, especially in the mobile ecommerce context," Park said.

The researchers, who reported their findings in the current issue of *Computers in Human Behavior*, also said that agents who responded more quickly to customers during the chat were rated more positively than those who did not. This quick, back-and-forth—synchronous—type of conversation, makes customers feel more like they are taking part in a real conversation.

"When people are [instant messaging](#), for example, and the messages are flying back and forth, so that one person sends a message and the other person immediately responds, it feels like they are in the same place," said Sundar. "That can create the feeling of social presence."

Responsiveness is particularly important when businesses deal with customer complaints, according to Park.

"Feelings of co-presence, constructed by the agent's promptness, might lead customers to be loyal to the company by creating a favorable service experience," Park added.

The researchers found that while both responsiveness during conversations and the use of emoticons resulted in improved customer ratings, the two tactics seemed to take different routes to achieve those results, according to Sundar. The emoticons made customers feel emotionally connected to the agent, but the quick conversations gave customers a feeling of being together in a physical sense.

"To have a meaningful conversation we often need to be in the same place at the same time, however, in a mediated environment, when you're distant and not in the same place as the person you are communicating with, it's hard to create that feeling of togetherness," said Sundar. "What this shows is that if a conversation can't happen in the same place, at least it can happen at the same time, which leads to positive evaluations."

Because online messaging and texting are relatively inexpensive, businesses are promoting these technologies as ways to process customer queries and complaints.

"Face-to-face communication would be ideal. Unfortunately that isn't feasible for most companies," said Sundar. "But perhaps there are creative ways that these companies can offer some benefits of face-to-face conversations in an online environment, such as by using emoticons and instant messaging."

The researchers recruited 108 participants from Seoul, South Korea universities and assigned them to interact with one of nine different versions of a fictitious e-commerce site. Each version represented a different variation of the study, including three different response

times—immediate, one hour and six hours—and three different modes of communication—text only, text and pictures and text and [emoticons](#).

The participants were then instructed to talk with a customer service agent on a mobile phone texting app about an issue with a defective camera.

Sundar said that although the study was conducted in South Korea, where using texting in business is more common, he expected similar results in countries and among cultures that may not be as advanced in using texting as part of [customer service](#) calls.

Provided by Pennsylvania State University

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