

Customer Service Communication Quality: Trend Comparison and Analysis between Government Organisation and Non-government Organisation

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Interpersonal communication is fundamental for front desk service in an organisation that shows its image and reputation to the customer. Therefore this research is to observe and to compare the practice of customer service communication around the counter, the customer while waiting, customer service, the attendant's response towards customer's complaint or problems and the customer satisfaction. This research also focuses on the communication quality and trend analysis of the similarities and the differences of the government service counter and non-government service counter. Eight organisations; four government organisations and four non-government organisations, are observed as the samples of the research. The data for this research is collected with the observations and interviews. The observations data is collected through three areas; outer space, insider space and integrated space, while for the interviews, thinking aloud method is used with the Cognitive Task Analysis (CTA). The research shows that the customer service communication at the non-government organisations had achieved good quality in all the research aspects. Meanwhile, at the government organisation, two out of four customer service counters recorded significant to customer satisfaction. On the other hand, respondents were complaining; three at the government organisation and two at the non-government organisation, about the counter atmosphere, the customer service facilities and the non-verbal communication. Observing through the inter-personal, intra-personal, the service aspect, friendliness and the listening skills, non-government service counter served better. The academic based customer service counter shows the trend below scale three; while the non-government service counters were significant in terms of atmosphere, presentation and the commitment to the customer. Therefore, this research suggests the customer service focuses on the human relationship through the friendliness communication; direct meaning, motivational meaning, humanization al meaning and collective wisdom.

1.0 Introduction

Communication is an important medium in the context of human socialization. The process of communication makes living harmonious, through the shared interaction and information sharing between individuals (Schramm & Roberts, 2006) which occurs naturally. Within an organization, there is interaction mechanism between groups and individuals (Md Yusuf Anim, 1997; Shukri, 1998 & 2004) which allows communication to be focused towards critical and creative problem solving (Shukri, 2009 and Berger, 1980). An example of the trend within the mechanism would be General Public Communications, which includes service counter communications.

According to Samsudin (1993) to express or exchange messages through personal interaction is an important procedure (Fisher, 1981; Philip, 1976 and Abelli, 1996) within service counter communications. At this stage where sharing of meaning is very important (Scrhamm, 1971 and Rogers, 2005) in giving allowance for a conscious exchange of ideas and emotions (Shukri, 1998). This means that, the ability to improve the level of meaning exchange could help to identify the level of effectiveness of service counter communication and customer satisfaction (Nek Kamal, 2006) in the intended interaction atmosphere.

The relationship between service counter communication and customer's reaction towards the interaction processes that they have been through is the focus that is to be analysed by this research. Customer's response serves as an indicator towards the effectiveness of the communication practices within a governmental and private sector (non-governmental) organization.

2.0 Problem Statement

Counter services within an organization are an early indication of their image and reputation (Nek Kamal, 2006) . Internal perspective adapts this as the norm and self-integrity of the members within the organization. It can also give a clear picture whether the communication that have been practised aims towards the mission, vision and the qualities within the strategic management of the organization itself. The service representative has the responsible to associate his/her interpersonal communication skills effectively in order to build a parallel relationship between customers towards problems solving (Janary, 2008; Shukri, 1998; Saodah Wok, *et al*, 2003 & Mc Auley, 1979) and processes simplification customer service (Mohd Hamdan, 1987 & 1988).

Customers' reaction towards service counter communication practices that were incompetent, not smooth (Abd Rahim, 2003), lacking in terms of friendliness and also with difficulties in terms of courteous and professional interaction (Mohd Hamdan, 1987; Mortsen, 1972 & Shukri, 2004); are often presented in the newspapers (Shamsudin. 1992) and the Internet (Jeneri Amir, 2006; Sulaiman, 2003 & Slovan, 2004).

Service representatives are usually exposed to training, as they are skilled public relations personnel. These groups of professional are often linked to Public Relations Officers (PRO) in terms of profession. Even though, there are still some shortcomings in terms of professional skills when the job is done by individuals who are not from that particular field of work. Furthermore, within governmental organizations, where personnel with specific skills are often lacking, these posts were often passed on to the Lower Public Administrative Assistant (*Pembantu Tadbir Awam Rendah*). This situation complicates the process of communications, when this group has a questionable academic and professional background, and are unable to support the customer's intentions. Conflicts within interaction would occur as a result of the different desires of

customers – who come from a myriad of different backgrounds – and the service representatives, who are often not up to the quality standards of PRO. Within the private sector, it is the customer's satisfaction which are prioritized. However, there are evidence of some organizations that give more priority to profits, commercial values and tight procedural processes that would cause difficulties with the customers. This would thus bring customer dissatisfaction.

The implication of which is service representatives were seen as unable to translate communication as an understood orientation towards a set of signals between both parties; providers and receivers of signals with the intention of acquiring the same state of thought or understanding (Samsudin, 1993; Miller & Nicholson, 1976 & Zulkifli, 2000). Certain aspects of verbal communication such as vocal clarity and courteousness; as well as non-verbal communication, for example, smiling, intimacy, listening, tendency to cause implicit reaction (such as complains and customer's irritations) or explicit reaction (customer's complains, predictable behavior and delayed affairs) were overlooked.

Customer complains were found to be much more frequent towards the governmental organizations (Mohd Hamdan, 1988; Samsudin, 1992 & 1993) than towards private organizations or ruling bodies (Sulaiman, 2003). It is also found that the intra-personal dimension – seen through non-verbal communication – are the focus of the customers' attentions and reactions. This implies that, service counter communication styles and practices are hoped (by the customers) to be more customer friendly and smooth, channelling the exchange of information, and at the same time, be tolerant. Fifteen percent from customers' complains touches on the aspects of counter service area, which is said to be uncomfortable due to the lack of facilities such as seats and waiting space which makes it very crowded.

According to Hovland (1953), this situation contrasts starkly to the aspirations of relations which stresses on mutual agreements in the effort of easing the shaping of acceptance. Even though, it has a tendency to become a pushing factor for other organizations when customers decide to use other means of approach or to use other other service counters as an alternative. In other words, the reaction mechanisms within communication styles are considered as crucial. Other than to modify the individual behaviours of others (customers), specifically (Berlo, 1960) the implementation (receptionist) should be planned consciously (Motley, 1990 & Anderson, 1991; Johnson, 2007 and Shukri, 2009).

Therefore, this research tries to answer some of the questions below;

- a) Does a customer service counter provide a comfortable environment?
- b) How far have service counter representatives use verbal communication and non-verbal communication when interacting with customers?
- c) Is the customers satisfied with the treatment given by the representative?

- d) How much differences and similarities exist between the customer service counter standard levels of Governmental and Private Organization counters?

3.0 Research importance

Interpersonal communication is the basis of the service counter. The roles of the communication in public relation is stated in the declaration of World Public Relation Conference (*Persidangan Perhubungan Awam Sedunia*) at Toronto (Shukri, 2004a) as: the professional medium that bridges the organisation to the public (customer). The research focuses on the front desk service as one of the dimensions in the public relation that conducted based on the statement saying that there is no research, that focused on the comparison between the practice of communication in the government organisation and private sector through the perspective of human resource inner atmosphere, had been done before in Malaysia. From the macro management view, hopefully the result of this research will help the *Jabatan Perdana Menteri* (Prime Minister's Department) all the way through the subscale agencies such as MAMPU and INTAN to determine the trend and the indicator from the inner atmosphere of the government institutions/departments to enhance and to maintain the over all quality as stated in the *Total Quality Management* (TQM) and the working process quality standard (ISO 9000).

Research based on the public relation factor is the main source in the creation of a conducive atmosphere in an organisation. From the human relation features data that been collected from the respondents, it can be the guideline for the organisation to present the standard service to achieve the customer's satisfaction. This research will as well show views from the individual that involved (attendants, customer and researcher) as the customer service quality guideline when organising and the future of organisation quality standard expectation. This will help the particular organisation reflects to achieve prestigious corporative image.

4.0 Research objectives

This research is basically focused to achieve these objectives:

- 4.1 To determine whether the customer service counters are well cared
- 4.2 To observe the facilities that been offered at the government customer service counter and at the private customer service counter
- 4.3 To observe the customer responses upon services by the attendant
- 4.4 To observe the customer responses upon waiting for services
- 4.4 To analyze the level of communication suitability when the attendant serving researcher
- 4.5 To determine the similarities and differences of service communication between the government service counter and the private service counter.

5.0 Methodology

This research is conducted through observation at eight organisations; four government organisations and four non-government organisations (private). The data is collected by observations and interview. This instrument acts as a guideline to the researcher to collect, to analyse and to interpret the data.

This research is conducted via *outer space*, *insider space* and *integrated space* to get the significant responses that are reliable and valid. (Shukri, 1998; Kemmis & Mc Taggart, 1988).

Interview is used to apply *thinking aloud* with the *Cognitive Task Analysis* to get authentic qualitative data (Shukri, 2004a; Hasserbrock & Prietula, 1992).

“Thinking aloud is just as truly behaviour as is circling a correct answer test”
(Newel & Simon, 1992)

6.0 Research observation result

6.1 Around the counter

Referring to Table 1 (appendix), it is found that the counter management by the attendants is well except at the counter B and C. Counter B was left unattended for the first 30 minutes and only attended after being asked to the other attendant that walked in the office. Meanwhile, attendant at counter C was seen doing other things.

6.2 Around the counter

- 6.2.1 In the government organisation, counter A (74%) and D (66%) showing the significant comfortable level to the customer. Counter C (40%) and B (52%) were at the level of below satisfactory especially when the seating facilities, sound, room temperature, air quality and reading materials are concerned.
- 6.2.2 In the non-government organisation, all four counters had reached the customer's satisfaction in their facilities. Counter F was the most significant (90%) followed by counter G (74%), counter E (70%) and counter H (66%).
- 6.2.3 The best serving counter between these two organisations was counter F (private). This organisation scored the highest (scale 5) for the seating facilities, sound, air quality and suitability for the pictures on wall. Other facilities were also at the good level (scale 4) except for the food and beverages, which they not served.

6.3 Customer's condition while waiting

- 6.3.1 Excluding counter D, E and F, the rest received complaints from the customer especially from the government organisation (counter A, B and C). Complaints for counter A were basically on the seating facilities where there were a lot of visitors and lack of chairs. Visitors had to stand in the stuffy place. Meanwhile for counter B and C, the complaints were focused on the human factor where the attendants were not committed during service and when helping the customers with their problems.
- 6.3.2 Customers' response to the levels of waiting comfort at non-government counters, G and H are "satisfactory" (scale 4) but there were complaints on insufficient seats (G) and counters that are not open to the customers (H).
- 6.3.3 Services at counter D (government) and E, F (non-government) have satisfactory surrounding facilities and human resource to enable customers to wait in patience and comfort.

6.4 Personnel's services to customers

- 6.4.1 Customers are satisfied with services given by the staff at counter A, D, E, F, G and H especially in friendliness and readiness to listen. However, non-verbal communication is on a average level (scale 3) in every counter except at counter F (scale 5).
- 6.4.2 Organizations that are represented by counter B and C show an average level (scale 3) for services given by the staff . However staff at counter C has shown to be better in terms of readiness to listen compared to the staff in counter B.
- 6.4.3 Counter F that represents an organization that prioritizes on effective verbal and non-verbal communication towards the customers. It can be shown through the satisfactory level in all three sub-scales of friendliness, readiness to listen and non-verbal communication.

6.5 Personnel's services to researcher.

- 6.5.1 The staff in counter A and D (government) as well as all non-government counters are found to be using an appropriate communication style to the researcher. Whereas counter B and C have shown an average and slightly inappropriate level of service.
- 6.5.2 There is a similarity between customers' satisfaction in terms of customer service with researcher's satisfaction. It is shown through satisfy response by customers and researcher in counters A, D, E, F, G and H.

Zain

- 6.5.3 Organization that are represented by counter B and C should follow the customer service communication practices of other non-government counters which can improve the quality of civil relations.

6.6 Personnel's response to problematic customer.

- 6.6.1 Staffs in counter G and H have not encountered any problematic customers. However other counters have experienced facing those kinds of customers. Among actions that have been taken to overcome with those kind of customers are reprimands (counter A, C, D and F) , and giving advice (counter E and F).
- 6.6.2 For obstinate customers, stern action is taken by enforcing rules (counter A and B), showing job procedure as well as raising the voice (counter B), give proper explanation (counter C, E and G), giving advise (counter D) and referring the case to the leader (counter F and H).
- 6.6.3 The problem with understanding Bahasa Melayu or English among the customers does not occur in counter B, D and E. Whereas in counter C, G and H, the staff would refer the problem to their leader or ask other staff members to handle the problem. The staff in counter A is willing to use other languages or dialects that he/she familiar with to communicate with the customers. The staff in counter F is the only staff that will assist the customers with simple approaches before referring it to other colleague if the first attempt fails.

6.7 Customers' satisfaction towards counter services

- 6.7.1 According to table 1, customers are satisfied with services in counter A, D, E, G and H. Only in counter B and C customers are not contend with.
- 6.7.2 The response from customers towards counter B and C are more on interpersonal communication (verbal). As shown in finding; on table 1: "difficult to consult" "too much red tape" and "communication is too formal" (counter B), "not friendly to customers" and "too many instructions than information" (counter C).
- 6.7.3 The findings in Transcription Table 1 lists down reasons why customers are not satisfied with the service provided to them. Through a *thinking aloud* analysis, it is found that respondents go through a meta-reasoning process as can be seen from **paraphrase 4**: "we understand that they have to handle a large number of customers, but its not wrong for them to explain in a well-composed manner once in a while" and **paraphrase 6**: "it would be even better if reading materials are prepared... ermm... it can help take care of the boredom and stress of waiting".

- 6.7.4 The analysis of **paraphrase 1** (data exploration), **2** and **3** (data explanation) shows the level of customer dissatisfaction towards the non-verbal communicative and interpersonal aspect of the customer service representatives, which are thought to be mediocre.
- 6.7.5 Transcription Table 3, on the other hand, indicates that the positive feedback from the customers regarding the counter service that they have received. From paraphrase 1 and 5 (data exploration), 2 (data examination), 3 (data interpretation) and 4 (data explanation); it is found that the customers are satisfied with the counter surroundings; and the “warmth” , “respect” (non-verbal communication), “determination to help” and “the amount of explanation and suggestion” (verbal communication) shown to them by the customer service representatives.

6.8 Comparative Analysis.

6.8.1 Similarities

- i. The counter services provided by Education Based Organisations B and C show an interpersonal communicative trend that gives unsatisfactory results, according to the perception of the customers. This situations is obvious from the counter environment, verbal and non-verbal communication quality levels given to the representatives that scored 2 and 3.
- ii. The lack of suitable reading materials were a unsatisfactory aspect that is can be seen in all the organisations involved in this study, except for organisations F and G. In this context, all four government organisation counters are found to be mediocre and ineffective, that is, being put on a very unsatisfactory, unsatisfactory and not very satisfactory levels.
- iii. Physical constraints are affective in 6 out of the 8 organisations, through the service provided by counters A, D, E, F, G and H. This means that the customers feel comfortable interacting through the aforementioned counters, as they are said to have similarities in terms of the physical constrains of the respective counter environments.
- iv. Other then counter D, the service provided by other government counters have received customer complaints in terms of the low levels of comfort experienced while waiting to be served.
- v. All the non-governmental organisation counters have similarities in terms of interpersonal communicative practices. This can be seen

from the customer response to these counters, which are rated as highly satisfactory (4 and 5 on the scale).

- vi. Non-verbal aspects of communication are not applied optimally by 7 of the 8 organisations studied. This shows how there are correlations between the norms and values of the organisation in regards to non-verbal communication when it comes to representative-customers interaction.
- vii. The action taken by customer service representatives in response to problematic customers brings to light the internal control focus trends of all organisations, such as *reminder*, *advising*, *warning*, *referring to superiors*, and *explanation and enforcement of rules*. This means that, all the studied organisations are not inclined to involve the local authorities or police as a problem solving method.

6.8.2 Differences.

- i. The services provided by non-governmental counters are more effective in terms of the implementation of aspects such as counter environment, physical appearance and representative commitment towards the customers; in comparison to the services provided by government agencies/departments.
- ii. In terms of customer satisfaction; they are more satisfied (4 and 5 on the scale) with the services provided by non-governmental organisations, and there were only one common gripe that cropped up while waiting at counters G and H. This can be compared to the service provided by service counters of governmental organisations, 2 of which (B and C) were found to be unsatisfactory by the customers and major gripes and issues with 3 (A, B and C) of the 4 counters studied.
- iii. Different from other organisations studied, organisation F projects an excellent image. This gives the impression that it is the only organisation that optimizes its interpersonal communicative skills through the significant use of the verbal and non-verbal dimension. This means that this organisation has managed to build a prestigious corporate image successfully, and this has been verified by the customers in terms of service satisfaction (refer to paraphrase 7, Transcription Table 3) and best example (refer to paraphrase 6, Transcription Table 3).
- iv. From 8 of the studied organisations, only organisation H provides suitable reading materials that is found to be satisfactory by the customers. This means that this organisation is a pioneer in terms of propagating the reading habit throughout its customers.

- v. The service provided by counters B and C are found to be based on different communicative practice values in comparison to other governmental and non-governmental organisations studied. This is shown through customer response, which has categorized both as of low reputation, in terms of counter environment, representative appearance, the form of service and commitment towards the solution of customer problems.

6.9 The advantages of verbal and non-verbal communication in an excellent organization.

- 6.9.1 From the research, it shows that counter F represents an excellent organization. As an organization which is based on transportation and flight service, organization F was discovered to be able to drive its human resources in order to establish itself as an outstanding corporate entity even though there is not less than 2 domestic and more that 10 foreign organization with the same orientation.
- 6.9.2 Its main human resource focus is on the standard of customer service communication. The counter receptionists were found to have always made the customer comfortable in communicating by smiling, being respectful and cheerful. The receptionist was also found to be neat, plus the commercial imaged uniforms that they wear had actually caught the customers' eyes. Moreover, complete facilities as well as the décor were found to create a conducive and refreshing ambience through out the customer's business transaction. From the observation, receptionists from the excellent organization use body gestures, facial expressions, touches and signs as an effective non-verbal communication instrument to sustain the comfortable ambience in the communication for future interaction well. The human relations theory of interpersonal communication assumes that the context of human nature, if generated through its natural dimension (non-verbal), then inter-human relations will become more meaningful, interesting and fun.(Shukri, 1998 & 2004b; Hollander, 1981; Fisher, 1981 and Arthur. Et al., 1969).
- 6.9.3 This organization was also found to give emphasis on language level mastery skill, language politeness and the clear speech (Sperder & Wilson, 1986) of direct meaning and motivational meaning sentences. Social elements such as asking about how the customers' are and also their purpose of applying for certain services. This will help the customer to obtain precise information and hastens the customer's business at the counter, and also encourages a relaxing environment throughout the interaction. This

verbal communication practice of this counter, correlates with the communication theory context (Littlejohn, 1996; Adler & Rodman, 1986 and Shukri, 2004a) which gives emphasis on the adaptation of the existing environment (Smith 1973; Porter & Steers, 1981 and Shukri, 1998) to enable “collective wisdom” (Littlejohn, 1996) to be accomplished by the communicator (receptionist) and receptor (customer) via an emphasis on the message that relates to conscious actions (Littlejohn, 1996; Clavanger, 1991 and Mortensen, 1972). With simple words, the message from verbal communication processes, (Goldhaber, 1983) normally help the customer to understand the explanation, manual and main points that being provided by the receptionist.

7.0 Conclusion

An excellent counter service depends on the steady application of interpersonal communication practices in customer service. In this context, communication plays its part as a theory and practice to enable a close relationship among the party involved to reach one clear and precise consensus (Goldhaber, 1983; Shukri Zain, 2004a). From that, a two-way communication was created consciously and unpretentiously to limit any confusion, deviations or even conflict. At the end, the purpose of communication is to help accomplish a human relation focused customer service (Conrad, 1985; Porter & Steers, 1981), with an assumption that there is a win-win situation aspiration tendency between the receptionist and the customer. An excellent organization, apart for driving the importance of marketing, yet tries to fulfil the need of customer satisfaction that being generated by the interpersonal communication framework based on authentic ethics.

Communication is one of the fields of knowledge that have to be viewed from the association and assimilation theory point of view which combines human with dynamic interaction process. It is not static, as it keeps on developing to make human socialisation easier. Communication generates life by gathering elements of civilization, social norms and innovation as a tool to fulfil the human nature of taking full benefit from the good of communication. The world of customer service is becoming easy and wonderful with the advent of communication (Ledingham, J.A. & Bruning, S.D., 2000). If there is no communication, even though the services provided in an organization as wide as the ocean, could all only be kept as decoration and will fail to obtain benefit from this entire world.

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Zain

Table 1a: Summary of Communication Response to Counter Service

Item	Statements	Organizations							
		A	B	C	D	E	F	G	H
1.0	Is the counter receptionist always at the counter?	Y	T	T	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y
1.1	If not, why?	-	There are no customers	Doing other work	-	-	-	-	-
2.0	Is the surrounding area comfortable ?	N	NS	NS	N	N	N	N	N
2.1	Physical barrier	4	3	2	4	4	4	4	4
2.2	Seats	3	2	2	5	4	4	3	3
2.3	Room temperatures	5	3	2	4	4	5	4	4
2.4	Sounds	3	2	2	4	4	4	3	4
2.5	Air quality	5	2	2	4	4	5	4	4
2.6	Air-conditioner	5	3	3	4	4	5	4	4
2.7	Reading Materials	3	2	1	1	3	4	4	3
2.8	Foods/Drinks	-	-	-	-	-	-	4	-
2.9	Pictures	5	3	2	3	4	5	3	3
2.10	Mirrors	4	4	4	4	4	4	4	4

Y-Yes, N-No, S- Satisfied, NS- not satisfied .

Score Scale: 1= very dissatisfied

2= dissatisfied

3= average

4= satisfied 5= very satisfied

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Table 1b: Summary of Communication Response to Counter Service

Item	Statements	Organisations							
		A	B	C	D	E	F	G	H
3.0	Customers waited comfortably and patiently	3	3	3	4	4	4	4	4
4.0	Is there any complaints?	Y	Y	Y	N	N	N	Y	Y
4.1	Friendly	4	3	3	4	4	5	4	4
4.2	Listen carefully	4	3	4	4	4	5	4	4
4.3	Non verbal communication	4	3	3	3	3	5	3	3
5.0	Good attendance	4	3	3	4	4	4	4	4
5.1	Communication styles	Suitable	Below Average	Not suitable	Suitable	Suitable	Suitable	Suitable	Suitable

Y-Yes, N-No, S- Satisfied, NS- not satisfied

Score Scale: 1= very dissatisfied 2= dissatisfied 3= average
4= satisfied 5= very satisfied

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Table 1c: Feedback Summary of Counter Service Communication

Item	Statement	Organization							
		A	B	C	D	E	F	G	H
6.0	Ask the receptionist how they handle customers that are:								
6.1	Rude	Give reminder	Admonish, Give a sharp eye	Warn	Give reminder	Advise	Advise	-	-
6.2	Stubborn	Enforce the rules	Show the work procedure	Explain the rule	Advise	Explain	Refer to boss/chief	Give explanation	Refer to boss/chief
6.3	Without knowledge of Malay or English	Use the language, dialect they know	-	Refer to staff who knows the customer language	-	-	Try to simplify, if fail refer to friend	Help	Refer to officers

Table 2: Customer Transcription

(1) There is a counter, its beautiful... but... heh... the receptionist were on and off, so what? ..(2)...when we ask, oh my God, their face turn fury like tiger...(3) If there is, can you speak while face to face...(4) We're understand they have to attain to many customer, however once in a while, it would be nice if they can explain it nicely. (5) Air-conditioning? It's fine. Comfy while we wait. (6) It would be nicer if they provide reading materials... yap... can kill some time while waiting, not so boring.

1. Data Exploration
2. Data explanation
3. Data explanation
4. Meta reasoning
5. Data inspection
6. Meta reasoning

Table 3: Customer (Private Sector)

- (1) When you get a waiting number in the hundreds, you'll have to wait for a ticket.
 - (2) Counters are all open, and every thing's fast.
 - (3) Business seem smooth, and the staff are friendly and are respectful of the customers.
 - (4) The waiting facilities are comfortable and breezy.
 - (5) The most important are the fact that they seem so helpful when there's a ordering problem... yap... even giving great explanation and suggestions.
 - (6) This is the best example, if only other parties can follow this kind of customer service practices...
 - (7) I'm satisfied, surely there aren't going to be any problems to come here again... other people too!
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- (1) Data Exploration
- (2) Data Checking
- (3) Data Interpretation
- (4) Meta Explanation
- (5) Data Exploration
- (6) Meta reasoning
- (7) Generalization Hypothesis