SERVICE SCRIPT EFFECTIVENESS IN INTER-CULTURAL SERVICE ENCOUNTERS

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ABSTRACT

In this article we explore the concept of *inter-cultural service encounters* (i.e., when service customers and service providers are from different ethnic cultures), and the effectiveness of service scripts during such encounters. To gain a better understanding of the nature of service scripts within the context of *inter-cultural service encounters*, we employ the concept of cultural distance and its subsequent impact on service scripts via the mediating effects of cross-cultural communications. Using this concept as our primary theoretical foundation, we develop and set forth several propositions about the effectivenss of service scripts during *inter-cultural service encounters*.

INTRODUCTION

Scripts are not new to business. From McDonald's to Disney, scripts (i.e., carefully crafted dialogues) are used by employees as they go about the task of interacting with customers. Salespeople have long used scripts as an efficient means of delivering sales proposals to prospective clients. Business executives use well-practiced scripts as they deliver professional presentations. Experienced negotiators rehearse scripts as a team before they go to the negotiation table. After many years of perfecting their scripts in the classroom, college professors deliver their lectures effortlessly. Trial lawyers think carefully about how to craft scripts and how to deliver them in the courtroom. The common thread woven throughout these examples is that the use of scripts can be an effective way of conveying a message. These examples also suggest that a well-crafted and well-performed script can be practical, useful, and efficient.

Within the context of cultural diversity, we would argue that poorly devised and/or ill-implemented service scripts may lead to customer alienation and may have a disastrous effect on customer satisfaction. The increased occurrence of service organizations operating across national boundaries, demographic changes that are occurring around the world and the embracing of cultural diversity as a business strategy, represent a variety of recent trends. The convergence of these trends virtually ensures that service encounters between service providers and service customers who do not share the same culture will increase in frequency. If service organizations are to be successful within the context of increasing cultural diversity in their work force, there is a need for managers of these organizations to be able to determine the degree to which service scripts are effective or ineffective during *inter-cultural service encounters*.

RESEARCH PROPOSITIONS

A general proposition we set forth in this paper is that cross-cultural communications determines the effectiveness or ineffectiveness of service scripts. One measure of communication effectiveness is how well individuals are able to understand clearly the verbal and nonverbal messages they receive from one another (Conrad, 1985). Implied here is that if communication effectiveness is to be achieved, individuals must be able to communicate in a common language. Indeed, Bolman and Deal's (1992) suggestion that a common language is a prerequisite for effective communication further suggests that service providers and service customers must be at approximately the same level of proficiency in the official language of a given country. The implication here is that variations in proficiency levels limit individuals' ability to quickly and clearly understand outcome dependent communication that takes place during an *inter-cultural service encounter*. Whether verbal or nonverbal communication, the implication *for inter-cultural service encounters* is that the greater the cultural distance between service providers and service customers, the greater the expected difficulty in communicating effectively with one another, and thus fully understanding the service script. Thus, we set forth the following propositions:

> **Proposition 1**: Service scripts are most effective, during *an inter-cultural service encounter*, when there is a small cultural distance between service providers and service customers.
> **Proposition 2**: Service scripts are least effective, during an *inter-cultural service encounter*, when there is a large cultural distance between service providers and service customers.

Service Script Type and Effectiveness

Service encounters vary in the amount and type of communication that takes place between service providers and service customers. We identify three types of service scripts: **structured** (the communication dialog that occurs between service providers and service customers during a service encounter is clearly mapped), **semi-structured** (it is not only imperative for service providers to learn the script; they must understand the service script in its entirety), **dynamic** (communication between service providers and service customers is improvisational). Suggested here is that communication effectiveness has major implications for the effectiveness of the different types of service scripts that are performed during *inter-cultural service encounters*, especially when there is a large cultural distance between service providers and service customers. Specifically:

> **Proposition 3**: Structured service scripts are more effective than semi-structured and dynamic service scripts, during an inter-cultural service encounter, when there is a large cultural distance between service providers and service customers.
> **Proposition 4**: Semi-structured service scripts are more effective than dynamic service scripts, during *an inter-cultural service encounter*, when there is a large cultural distance between service providers and service customers.
> **Proposition 5**: Dynamic service scripts are more effective during *an intercultural service encounter* when there is a small cultural distance between service providers and service customers, as opposed to there being a large cultural distance.

DISCUSSION AND IMPLICATIONS

In a recent study it was found that approximately six out of every ten new immigrants to the United States are employed by service and service-related sectors of the U.S. economy. This same study

concluded that limited formal schooling, literacy issues, and English-speaking proficiencies of some new immigrant workers will present many challenges to service employers in the United States. However, the United States is not the only country experiencing this phenomenon. For example, the "global work force" or workers from a variety of different cultures that are finding employment in countries other than their own will virtually ensure that a myriad of other countries will experience this phenomenon. Similar to the U.S. experience, a large percentage of these global workers will likely be employed by service and service-related sectors of their host country's economy.

A major implication of the global work force is that as service organizations in host countries hire more and more service providers who are culturally distant from many of their domestic service customers, the incidence of *inter-cultural service encounters* will increase. In situations in which global workers' facility with host-country language, communication style, mannerisms, etc., is low, the complexity of the exchange relationship will increase. Consequently, the increase in complexity is likely to impede the effectiveness of service scripts during *inter-cultural service encounters*.

Considering the script effectiveness issue within the context of a global workforce, a corollary managerial implication concerns how to strike a balance among service scripts that achieve organizational goals, acceptable to customers and, at the same time, are compatible with service providers' ability to effectively deliver such scripts during the communication exchange process with host-country service customers. For example, customers may not want to hear culturally distant service providers repeat the same script, perhaps communicated with an accent or other non-endearing configurations of the host country language, every time they place an order at a fast food restaurant or enter into a dialog that requires a more complex communication exchange.

Although service organizations may insist on the use of service scripts because they increase sales or make the service process more efficient, culturally distant service providers may not enjoy repeating the same script over and over again several hundred times a day; they may not like struggling to follow a more complex script, or left on their own to engage in complex dialogs with customers. To be sure, country notwithstanding, we would argue that it is a challenge for service organizations to design service scripts that are effective in achieving their goals, comfortable for service customers, and enjoyable or at least tolerable for service providers.

In developing service script strategies, designed to improve the effectiveness of service scripts during *inter-cultural service encounters*, it is important for future researchers to keep in mind that service provider/service consumer interactions play an important role in affecting the customer's assessment of the encounter. Like all service encounters, during *inter-cultural service encounters* the service provider is the service to the consumer. Therefore, to effectively employ service scripts in real world applications, it is imperative to study and understand this concept systematically and comprehensively. This paper has contributed to our understanding of this concept through systematic analyses and has contributed to the comprehensiveness of this area of research by building on the extant research on service scripts. The overarching message we have attempted to convey in this paper is that service scripts, when well crafted and well executed, can help service organizations achieve efficiency of service delivery and improve service quality during *inter-cultural service encounters*.

[A complete copy of this paper is available on request from any one of the listed authors]