Producing and communicating electronic sales messages in Hong Kong: insights from a discourse study and from industry practitioners

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Abstract

With the globalization of business and the advancement of technology, understanding communication across media is becoming increasingly important. This study compares the discourse structure of 80 online sales letters with that of 80 printed sales letters. These letters were randomly selected from a database of over 10,000 sales letters collected from 36 categories of recipients in Hong Kong. It is argued that an integrated theoretical framework of social discourse analysis and genre analysis is needed to explore how meaning is created in text, context, and interface of new media communication.

Similarities and differences are found to exist in the discourse structure of the two corpora. The digital medium seems to provide writers of the online letters with more space for information provision and more choice in persuasive appeals, such as exercising just-in-time pressure tactics. Results of the analysis are verified by findings derived from in-depth interviews with 17 specialist informants working in the field of new media and sales promotion communication. The knowledge and findings derived from this study can be of value to the development of corporate training materials in the field of marketing communication. Although this study is Hong Kong based, the use of electronic sales messages is not limited by geographical regions. Results of this study can thus have both local and global significance.

Key words: social discourse analysis; genre analysis; discourse structure; online sales letters; new media communication

Introduction

With the globalization of business and the advancement of technology, understanding communication across media is becoming increasingly important. This study compares the discourse structure of 80 online sales letters with that of 80 printed sales letters. These letters were randomly selected from a database of over 10,000 sales letters collected from 36 categories of recipients in Hong Kong over a six-month period. Based
on an integrated theoretical framework of social discourse analysis (van Dijk, 1997) and genre analysis (Swales, 1990; Bhatia, 1993), this study attempts to investigate the impact of new media on the discourse structure of online sales letters. It is believed that the impact would stand out more prominently by contrasting sales letters across two media, as Enkvist (1973: 21) states, “[t]he essence of variation […] is difference, and differences cannot be analyzed and described without comparison.”

The present article will first discuss the theoretical approach of the research, and then explain the research methodology. Due to the length constraint, this article will only present a few findings. Extracts will be quoted from the letters to illustrate the similarities and differences in discourse structures. Details of major hypotheses and other findings will be left to the presentation during the conference. This article will end with a concluding remark on how this study contributes to the field of marketing communication.

**Theoretical approach**

Discourse studies are facing challenges in this knowledge-based and fast-changing global society. A sales letter typically appears in “making contact” situations (Pilegaard 1997: 225), at the initial stage of a business communication sequence for business dealing. Traditionally, sales letters are printed and mailed to customers. However, technological changes are now altering sales and marketing, and obviously, the Internet is accelerating that trend. Besides changing the way companies connect to their customers, the Internet also expands “the opportunities for branding, innovation, pricing, and selling” (Hanson, 2000: 4). Companies find themselves able to create marketing materials with a global reach at a much lower cost. Online sales letters enable even the smallest companies to have a more even footing with the larger companies in competing for business. It is also expected that consumers will be receiving more online sales letters as e-business grows (Guffey, 2001: 206). Taking advantage of the Internet, such letters can now be presented in or supported by different kinds of new media such as digital graphics, animations, photos, videos, hypertexts, and online games, etc.

The deployment of new media in online sales letters raises two research questions which this study attempts to answer: What is the impact of new media on the discourse structure of online sales letters, and how does the use of new media influence the overall interactional or social strategy of credibility enhancement and persuasion in the context of sales promotion? These two questions require a theoretical framework that
looks at language as social interaction, that is, the way meaning is created in the text and in the context. Figure 1 integrates the theories of social discourse analysis (van Dijk, 1997) and genre analysis (Swales, 1990; Bhatia, 1993), which together form the most relevant approach to this study. The figure is original to this research. The theory of social discourse analysis emphasizes that the explanation of discourse needs to take into account not only the internal structures, social actions, and cognitive operations in language use, but also the broader sociocultural structures and processes (van Dijk, 1997: 21). It provides an ideological framework to look at discourse from both macro and micro perspectives. The theory of genre analysis helps reveal how the macro and micro structural choices interact in achieving the communicative purposes of a genre.

FIGURE 1. An integrated theoretical framework of analyzing new media communication

This integrated theoretical framework guides the researcher to analyze online sales letters as a type of new media communication. Similar to a printed one, an online sales letter is a communicative event through which the writer tries to persuade the reader to believe and to take action as he or she is told. Simons et al. (2001: 7) define persuasion as “human communication designed to influence the autonomous judgments and actions of others”. They stress that persuasion works on predisposition rather than imposition. The act of persuasion then involves notions of beliefs, text and language on the one hand, and those of beliefs, context and interaction on the other. Using a genre-based approach to text analysis, the researcher can find out how the social function of persuasion in online sales letters is realized in discourse structure. The researcher needs to seek advice from practitioners in the field of sales promotion communication in order
to understand how the persuader affects the values and perhaps the ideology of the persuadees towards the targeted item, so that they will feel and react as the persuader wants them to be and ultimately, respond and take action as they are told. Van Dijk (1997) compares the strategies in discourse to those in the game of chess, “chess players need to know the rules in order to play chess in the first place, but will use tactics, gambits, and special moves within an overall strategy to defend themselves or to win” (ibid: 31).

A sales letter is an interface through which the writer and the reader interact to make meanings. If we view a printed sales letter as a two-dimensional discourse structure in which the reader is expected to read from the top to the bottom, an online sales letter may be viewed as a multi-dimensional discourse structure in which the reader is provided with opportunities to leave and come back to the letter from time to time. This multi-dimensionality is created by a network of or networks of communicative events supported by various kinds of new media. The availability of the Internet enhances sales promotion through “direct, information-rich, and interactive contact with customers” (Turban et al., 2000: 25). In addition to being an information transmitter, the writer of online sales letters may bear a new role as a technology guider. The strategy through which new media are deployed in discourse will influence the encoding and decoding of sales messages. This brings together the notions of interaction, language and interface. The researcher needs to seek advice from new media directors or producers in the field of sales promotion communication so as to understand the relationship between communicative purpose and discourse technology.

**Corpus**

This study is situated in Hong Kong, which has the position of an international gateway and portal for business in the Asian region (The Government of the HKSAR, 2003). In order to develop a representative corpus for data analysis, attention has been paid to ensure that the letters are collected from people of as wide a spread as possible. Based on a correlation of four attributes, namely age group, gender, educational background, and occupation, 36 categories of recipients are possible. The recipients were identified through personal contacts, and were asked to forward to me any online and printed sales letters they received over a six-month period. Out of a total of over 10,000 sales letters collected, 160 letters (80 online and 80 printed) were randomly selected for a qualitative analysis.
Methodology

Sharing communicative purposes has been the principal criterion that characterizes a class of communicative events as a genre; exemplars of a particular genre share similarities in “structure, style, content and intended audience” (Swales, 1990: 58). It is the communicative purpose of exchanging goods, services and information, and the social function of informing and persuading that allow sales letters to be recognized by both writers and readers as a genre distinct from other modes of communication found within the business community. It is assumed here that if a genre is the result of constant and cumulative selections from structural choices governed by the communicative purposes, then it should be possible to quantify these selections. Moves and steps, as “rhetorical instruments that realise a sub-set of specific communicative purposes associated with a genre” (Bhatia, 2001: 84), form the units of analysis in this study. Following Zhu (2000), a move is taken in this study as a communicative event, which can be realized in one or more steps. The two corpora were found to share similar moves and steps according to a move scheme proposed by Cheung (forthcoming). The frequency of occurrence of each move and step is counted, and the percentage is calculated out of the total number of moves and steps. To verify results of the analysis, 17 specialist informants working in the field of new media and sales promotion communication were interviewed with each interview lasted for 45 mins to 2 hours each.

Discussion of results

Due to the length constraint, only a few findings will be discussed here, and where necessary, they will be illustrated with examples extracted from the data examined in this study. Comments provided by the specialist informants will be included, where appropriate, to support the explanation.

Move A: Setting the Scene

Move A Setting the Scene is the fifth most frequent move in the online corpus, with a percentage of 9.41%. It is the fourth most frequent move in the printed corpus, with a percentage of 9.55%. The percentages are nearly the same across the two corpora. This finding may imply that the frequency of occurrence of this move in general is not affected by the type of medium through which a sales letter is transmitted. However, differences can be identified in the use of two steps across the two corpora. Figure 2 below shows the results of the five steps under Move A.
Step A1 Relating to a Social Issue is more evident in the printed corpus. It has been found from data examined in this study that 63 out of 80 printed letters are directly addressing the Hong Kong readers while only 27 out of 80 online letters are doing the same. It indicates that with a more focused group of target readers, it may be easier for writers of the printed letters to set the scene of a sales proposition by identifying social issues that would be of concern to the potential readers.

There is a slightly higher percentage use of Step A4 Relating to the Reader in the online corpus (see Figure 2 above for details). This finding may be attributed to the possibility offered by online medium to personalize a sales message for a reader. Twelve specialist informants stated that the higher cost incurred in the production of printed letters bars their companies to do too much personalization in those letters. Example E-1 appears at the beginning of an online sales letter from Copernic, a company offering technology solutions for personal computers:

E-1 Our database indicates that you are a long-time user of Copernic 2001 Basic.
By claiming that the company’s database indicates the reader as a long-time user of the product, the writer intends to achieve three communicative purposes. First, a positive rapport is built up by highlighting the “long-time” relationship between the reader and the product. Second, the credibility of Copernic as a software solution provider is enhanced by portraying itself as being able to keep track of the reader’s usage rate with its database. Third, the long-time usage of the basic version of the product implies that it is now time to do an upgrade to a more advanced version, which forms the focus of the whole sales proposition. By making reference to the company’s database, the writer makes use of personalization, which “reflects the fundamental idea in marketing that customers want a product or service that best matches their needs” (Hanson, 2000: 185). Such an act of personalization helps boost the confidence of the reader towards the brand and the product.

**Move C: Introducing the Offer**

*Move C Introducing the Offer* is the most frequent move in both corpora (39.02% in the online corpus and 35.52% in the printed corpus). These results are unsurprising since a product or service is the heart of each sales letter and this move serves to “realize the propositional content of the sales promotion” (Vergaro, 2004: 195). Figure 3 below displays the results of the 12 steps under this move.

**Figure 3.** Results of *Move C Introducing the Offer* across the online and printed corpora
Marked difference can be found in the percentages of occurrence of Step C10 Pointing to Further Information in the online corpus (8.01%) and in the printed corpus (3.73%). Ten out of the 17 specialist informants stated that their companies sent out both printed and online sales letters, and the informant from Zacks mentioned that her company uses only online letters. These informants described various criteria in the production of online letters. First, an online letter is usually shorter and briefer than a printed letter, so that it can fit the computer screen size to cater for reading comfort. Second, readers of online letters have a bigger requirement on efficiency. They would expect the online sales message to be very concise and direct, so that they can get the meaning within a few seconds. Third, readers of online letters expect more interactivity with the screen interface, due to the nature of the digital medium. Text content is gradually giving way to more visuals and new media in the presentation of sales messages in the online letters. These comments explain the more frequent use of the said step in the online corpus. The following is an example, in which Dialog Strategy mentions the software and then points the reader to further information through a hyperlink. The availability of a digital interface gives more space for the writer to satisfy the reader’s “need for information”, which is vital in the process of making reasoned choices in a purchase (Blackwell et al., 2001: 245).

Step C8 Providing Details shows a higher frequency of occurrence in the printed corpus (8.66%) than in the online corpus (5.57%). It is possible that the medium of printed letters dictates that writers should put details of their offers in the letters. Although it may be argued that the details can be presented in leaflets or other enclosures to a letter, it would mean additional production and postage fees for a company. Indeed, various specialist informants mentioned the cost of producing printed sales packages as a concern for their companies. For example, the corporate informant from Zacks stated in her written response: “We have always used email as we have not been able to justify the extra cost of printing and postage of letters.”

Conclusions

Given that the two corpora are of the same genre, similarities exist in the frequency of
occurrence across the online corpus and the printed corpus. The results seem to confirm the genre-based hypothesis set out in this study, which predicts that texts with similar communicative purpose will display similarities in discourse structure, setting aside grammatical constraints. A few differences are identified. With the availability of a digital interface, writers of the online letters can point readers to further information about an offer through hyperlinks and graphic media. They can also exercise just-in-time pressure tactics, taking advantage of the short turnaround time of online communication. The knowledge and findings derived from this study can be of value to the development of corporate training materials in the field of marketing communication. Although this study is Hong Kong based, the use of electronic sales messages is not limited by geographical regions. Results of this study can thus have both local and global significance.

References


