Saying 'sorry': Corporate apologies posted on Twitter

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Abstract

Twitter offers companies an influential environment in which to enhance their reputation and build rapport with existing and potential clients. One important aspect of the emerging customer care discourse is the apologies made by companies via Twitter in response to customer complaints. The analysis focuses on 1183 apologies, and considers their distinctive components (the Illocutionary Force Indicating Device, Explanations, Offers of Repair (Blum-Kulka et al., 1989)) and their rapport building potential (as indicated through opening and closing moves, such as greetings, nominations, discourse markers and emoticons) as a form of image repair (Benoit, 1995) shaped by the media affordances of Twitter (Hutchby, 2001). Corporate apologies are distinctive for their relatively infrequent use of Explanations (as a form of mitigation) and their comparatively greater use of Offers of Repair (as a type of corrective action), which are typically combined with follow up moves such as imperatives and questions. They are also distinctive in their repeated, somewhat formulaic use of greetings and signatures which did not appear in the apologies posted by ordinary Twitter members.
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1. Introduction

Apologies appear ubiquitous, occurring in different languages and historical periods, may be realised in various forms, and achieve different functions. This paper examines the apologies that are made by companies in response to customer complaints, published in a relatively new context: the microblogging site, Twitter. The media affordances (Hutchby, 2001) of Twitter suggest that the site is a potent context in which companies need to manage their reputation through remedial speech acts like apologies. Most Twitter accounts are publically available (Madden et al., 2013) and the asymmetrical relationship between members and those that 'follow' them lends itself to the one-to-many interactions typical of other forms of broadcast talk (Page, 2012a). However, unlike mainstream media, Twitter is typical of participatory trends in social media (Jenkins, 2006). Anyone with an Internet connection may set up a Twitter account and gain unparalleled, instant access to the accounts of other Twitter members including those maintained by corporations and their personnel. In so doing, Twitter has reduced the need for gate-keeping personnel such as agents or managerial staff to filter communication from customers or clients. A customer may give feedback directly to their favourite store or brand by sending them a public addressed message, participate in online competitions or in return be notified of the latest offers by following the Twitter account associated with a company. Twitter thus extends the conversationalising trends of contemporary public discourse (Thornborrow and Montgomery, 2010), where dyadic interactions that might otherwise take place in private, off line contexts (such as email or telephone conversations) can be publically mediated, available for online scrutiny by the wider overhearing audience (Bell, 1984) of the general public.

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The tractable interactions on Twitter result in "searchable talk" (Zappavigna, 2011) that can be commercially valuable as a form of electronic word of mouth (Jansen et al., 2009). The conventions developed within the discourse of Twitter by its users such as @mentions (the use of a Twitter username within a post, such as @emccorp or @selfridges), hashtags (#uktesco) and retweets (a re-posted a message, usually marked by the abbreviation 'RT') function within an attention economy where visibility is prized. By tracking the use of these conventions, companies can monitor customers' talk about their brand, service or products. If a customer's post is negative (for example, containing a complaint), then this may pose a risk to the company's reputation and require a remedial response. As such, research in crisis communication has begun to recognise the value of Twitter as a site for apologies (Schultz et al., 2011; Utz et al., 2013), where Twitter's affordances of immediacy and directness are well suited to the timely and sincere characteristics associated with a successful apology.

2. Linguistic and rhetorical approaches to apologies

Apologies have attracted significant attention from a number of disciplines, including subfields in linguistics (especially in pragmatics, sociolinguistics and corpus linguistics) and communication (rhetoric, crisis communication and public relations). Scholars in these fields recognise that the form and function by which apologies are realised can vary, and there is debate surrounding the definition of the act itself. This study adopts Spencer-Oatey's description of an apology as a "post-event speech act" (2008:19), where the event in question (in this case, the customer's complaint) is perceived as requiring a remedial response (such as the apology). Customers can bring their complaints to the attention of the company in the public context of Twitter by including the company's username in their post, which causes the message to appear in the public timeline and the interactions folder of the company's profile. Once the company has received the message, they can respond by using Twitter's 'reply' function, which automatically includes the interactants' usernames and so will simultaneously publish the message in both the company's and the customer's profiles. The architecture of Twitter thus allows the complaint and apology to be directed to nominated addressees (the company and the customer), but also mediated in a public space that can be accessed by the 'overhearing' audience of any member of the general public viewing either account. An example of a typical interaction follows, where the customer expresses dissatisfaction with a food product.[1]

> The worst meal I've ever had to eat in work. 1 (one) piece of beef. Terrible taste. Very disappointed @waitrose
> http://t.co/S2uk62AX
> Mon, 13 Aug 2012 15:15

Just over an hour later, the company in question responded with a remediating message.

> @username Really sorry to hear this, please could you DM us your address, the shop you bought it in, Use By date and any printed codes
> Waitrose Mon, 13 Aug 2012 16:24

Communication via Twitter is usually rapid and "noisy" (Cha et al., 2010). Failure to respond promptly to a complaint can lead to further offence. In the following example, the customer received the acknowledgement of their complaint two days after their initial post, leading the customer to post further negative messages about the company in the interim.

> @waitrose thanks for ruining our day. Wife stuck @ westbury store 4got payment card and u can't take a card over the phone #customerfirst
> Sat, 11 Aug 2012 11:34
>
>
> @waitrose No reply? #customerlast
> Sun, 12 Aug 2012 17:33

The potential for further complaints suggests that the need to mitigate negative, public posts which threaten a company's reputation is high, even when the scale of the offence may be relatively low (compared with national or international crises, for example). But, as yet, little is known about the forms of apologies that companies make to individual customers on Twitter.

Within pragmatics, the research literature traces a number of paths through the far ranging and varied forms of apologies. One path focuses on identifying the characteristics of apologies as a speech act (Blum-Kulka et al., 1989;

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[1] In all tweets quoted in this paper, the usernames of corporate accounts have been retained. All usernames and personal names of individuals have been anonymized. In all other respects, the content of the quoted material is as it appeared in the public timeline of Twitter.