(I’m) Happy to Help (You):
The Impact of Personal Pronoun Use in Customer-Firm Interactions
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Abstract
In responding to customer questions or complaints, should firm agents linguistically “put the customer first”? Customer orientation theory, managerial sources, and surveys of managers, service representatives and consumers suggest that firm agents in this setting should emphasize how “you” (the customer) is served by “us” (or “we” the firm), while de-emphasizing “I” (the agent). We find evidence of this language pattern at over 40 firms. However, we theorize and demonstrate that these personal pronoun emphases may be sub-optimal. Eight studies using lab experiments and field data reveal that relative to plural self-referencing “we”, singular self-referencing (“I”) enhances perceptions that the firm agent feels (empathy) and acts (agency) on the customer’s behalf, leading to enhanced customer attitudes, intentions, and actual purchase behavior. Further, and contrary to lay predictions, we show that customer-referencing “you” pronoun use has little impact on customer and firm outcomes, and can sometimes have negative consequences. These findings enhance conceptual understanding of how language impacts social perceptions and provide valuable insights for marketers.

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All interested are welcome.