COMPUTER-MEDIATED COMMUNICATION IN SALES:
EXPLORING THE INFLUENCE ON THE BUYER-SELLER RELATIONSHIP

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ABSTRACT

This study focuses on computer-mediated communication and its impact on sales in the food service industry through the lens of qualitative research. The philosophy driving this study is the emphasis on the sales representative to establish and maintain customer relationships through all modalities possible, resulting in increasing sales (Winer, 2001). Walther’s (1992) Social Information Processing Theory provides the theoretical basis for this study in explaining the process by which individuals create and maintain relationships through two or more computer modalities. The intention of this study was to explore preferred methods of computer-mediated communication and the purpose driving the use.

The design of this study was an ethnographic approach consisting of a series of observations and customer interviews. The results of this study suggest that only after a face to face interaction can a strong seller / buyer relationship be maintained through computer-mediated communication. The findings contribute to communication studies and business studies in relation to the sales communication approach with customers through technology mediated communications.
Chapter 1: INTRODUCTION

The use of technology as a communication medium has become a widely researched topic in the area of relationship development transferring into the world of business. Most of the sales force today uses some form of technology supported communication to some degree in the day to day customer interactions. Historically, sales representatives were found to have the ability to pair appropriate content with the correct form and finesse during face to face communication in order to be effective (Soldow & Thomas, 1984). With the increased technological advances and the push for employees to accomplish more in less time, the sales force of today is finding themselves challenging the traditional model of face to face sales.

Social Information Processing Theory suggests that regardless of what previous relationship structures were, it is possible to develop a relationship with another individual through computer-mediated communication as it is through face to face communication (Walther, 1992). Due to relationships being such a vital aspect in the outcomes of a sales exchange, the method in which those relationships are developed and maintained is extremely important to the success of the overall company (Cannon & Perreault, 1999). As the world of technology quickly advances, it is increasingly important for sales representatives to know what types of computer-mediated communication are favored by the customer and what role that modality of communication will play in the sales interaction.

Importance of Study

Continued exploration in the area of computer-mediated communication research is needed to further identify the effects that this form of communication has on the seller / buyer relationship. There are multiple studies that support computer-mediated communication as a successful method to develop and maintain social relationships; although, they are developed at a slower rate (Walther, 2002). At this time there are conflicting studies on the outcomes of using computer-mediated communication as a
vessel to “closing the deal” and maintaining healthy business relationships. Because communication is the cornerstone of effective sales, examining the ways communication through technology impacts content, style, and trends is critical (Miller, 2009). Barriers and other relevant factors, such as effectiveness of different technology applications, customer comfort level, and geographical influences must also be considered in the research of computer-mediated communication in sales. The conclusions of this study will provide more specific information on the trends of computer-mediated communication types used and the customer’s perspective on the impact of the ever changing technologies. The positive and negative effects that computer-mediated communication has on the interpersonal relationship between themselves and their sales representative will also be explored in the industry specific area of Food Service.

**Definitions of Terms Used**

1) **Asynchronous Communication** - Partners communicate at their own leisure. An example of this type of communication would be email or voicemail (Santra & Giri, 2009).

2) **Communication Technology** - May consist of, but are not limited to the following: electronic mail, voicemail, facsimile, internet chat rooms, text messaging, video conferencing and calling, World Wide Web, management information systems, and online ordering / accounting.

3) **Computer-mediated Communication (CMC)** - Communicative interaction that occurs when two or more people are communicating through networked computer technology (Walther, 1996).

4) **Ethnography** - A qualitative research method that “has been developed for the study of cultures and cultural sense-making” (Eriksson & Kovalainen, 2011, p. 137).

5) **Food Service Industry** - Business of making, preparing, delivering prepared foods to an establishment such as a restaurant or cafeteria.
6) Social Information Processing Theory (SIP) – Theory that explains how others get to know each other online even with the absence of non-verbal cues. It describes how people develop and maintain relationships within a computer mediated environment (Walther, 1992).

7) Synchronous Communication - Partners communicate in real time responding to each other’s responses. An example of this type of communication would be talking on the phone or talking in a live chat room (Santra & Giri, 2009).

Organization of Remaining Chapters
The following chapters will review previous research surrounding the topic of computer-mediated communication, describe the study conducted and explain the findings. Chapter two provides an overview of the research pertaining to the topics of CMC and CMC used in business through review of the theoretical and philosophical basis, a broad look at CMC, and a more focused review of the relationship between CMC and sales. Chapter three describes the scope and methodology used to complete this research study. Chapter four examines the data produced from the study and what implications the data may have to influence communication practices in sales with the use of computer-mediated communication. To conclude, Chapter five identifies the limitations of the research and proposes potential areas for future research to be conducted. All five chapters will present a summative look at the previous research completed, the design and outcomes of this study, and what further areas of need there are to be researched in the future.
Chapter 2: REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

It is impossible to run a successful business without communication. Communication is central to any organization because it helps create shared meanings, norms and culture of the organization (Gumus, 2007). Generically, communication is the process of transferring information, meaning, and understanding between two or more parties, and there is a wide span of literature on how this process can be made more efficient and effective. Communication, whether virtual or face-to-face, is fundamental to getting any organizing or work done, as communication provides the basic building blocks with which people collaborate, make decisions, and act to achieve organizational objectives. Communication is also central to organizational socialization including sense making and affiliation (Flanagin & Waldeck, 2004).

Technology has become an integral part of how we communicate with one another, especially in our jobs. The range of technologies that have been implemented into the workplace in recent years, such as electronic mail (e-mail), instant messaging (IM), voice mail, facsimile (fax), audio and video conferencing, computer conferencing, management information system, Internet and World Wide Web as well as wireless networks (Miller, 2009), have impacted organizational communication in terms of communication content, communication patterns and organizational structure. The focus of this study is to look at the impact that technology has on interpersonal relationships in sales, by concentrating on computer-mediated communication (CMC), and how the buyer-seller relationship is affected by CMC, both positively and negatively in the Food Service industry. The results from this study should support and expand on the literature that is reviewed within this paper.

The use of CMC is common among many industries and past research is on a very broad spectrum of sales in general, but scarce in industry specific research. This study will review the communicative methods used in the food service industry, and for what purpose they are being used
Geographic location is also a topic of issue in this study on whether it plays a part in who uses CMC and who does not. Computer-mediated communication is theoretically supported by Social Information Processing Theory (SIP) which endorses online communication, and proposes that despite the inherent lack of cues found in the nonverbal communication of online interactions, there are many other ways for people to create and process personal, or individualized, information (Walther & Parks, 2002).

**Theory**

Social Information Processing Theory is an interpersonal communication theory that was developed by Joseph Walther in 1992, which explains how people get to know one another online, without nonverbal cues, and how they develop and manage relationships in the computer-mediated environment (Walther, 1992). Some researchers argue that online interpersonal relationship development may require more time to develop than traditional face-to-face (FtF) relationships. Ekman & Friesen (1969) state that in face-to-face communication, “the concurrent exchange of verbal messages along with appearance, kinesics (body movement and facial expression), vocalics (quality and use of the voice), proxemics (increases, decreases, and uses of space), and haptics (touch) provide an abundance of information all at once. The various cues do not always duplicate one another in terms of meaning; the compliment, contradict, accentuate, or minimize verbal cues and other non-verbal expressions” (395-396). If one or more of these elements are removed, we expect that less is getting communicated through the remaining mode(s), so they must work a bit harder to convey the message and are therefore slower. Considering further the conditions of asynchronous communication and the fact that in many cases, such as with email, each response or exchanges can take hours or even days to occur, one can see that relationship development can take even longer, “thus, when communication goes slowly, relationships accrue slowly” (Ekman and Freisen, 1969, p. 397).

Walther (2002) believes relationships grow only to the extent that parties first gain information about each other and use that information to form interpersonal impressions of whom they are. With
these impressions in mind, the interacting parties will draw closer only if each party likes the other’s images being presented (Walther, 2002). Walther acknowledges that nonverbal cues are filtered out of the interpersonal information that we send and receive through CMC. Unlike cues filtered out, he doesn’t think this loss is necessarily fatal to the development of the relationship. This is called Impression formation, the composite mental image one person forms of another (Walther, 2002).

Joseph Walther (1996) insists that the view of CMC as inherently impersonal must be revised and he suggests the "social information processing" perspective as an alternative to the cues-filtered-out theory. Instead of relying on the experimental method, he proposes a relatively long-term examination period in order to reveal true human interaction patterns in CMC. Social information processing theory asserts that in CMC message senders portray themselves in a socially favorable manner in order to draw the attention of message receivers and foster anticipation of future interaction. Message receivers, in turn, tend to idealize the image of the sender, overvaluing minimal, text-based cues. In addition, the asynchronous character of CMC gives the sender and the receiver enough time to edit their communication, making interactions in CMC more controllable and malleable, therefore reducing the stress of the immediate feedback loop inherent in face-to-face (FTF) interactions (Walther, 1996). Lastly, the idealized perception and self-presentation intensify the feedback loop. This idealized relationship makes cyberspace hyper-personal, actually exceeding FTF interactions in intensity (Walther, 1996).

In an interview with Em Griffin, Dr. Joseph B. Walther, a communication professor at Cornell University, describes the CMC and it’s correlation to his Social Information Processing Theory, in which he describes it as, “how people get to know one another and develop relationships through computer mediated communication”, for example emailing, texting, computer conferencing and the internet (Walther, 2012). The internet is used a variety of reasons, some are for business, while some are for
personal reasons. While walking around in today’s businesses, in most cases you are going to see computers or lap tops at every cubicle or office. Dr. Walther was asked about the negative conceptions that some have about CMC and the scholars that have studied new electronic media who have offered a variety of theories to explain the inherent differences between CMC and face-to-face communication. In most of these theories they favor a “cues filtered out” interpretation that regards the absence of nonverbal cues as the medium’s fatal flaw (Griffen, 2011). Dr. Walther states that these theories argue that there are no nonverbal cues that we normally rely on for judgment and give off social information about who we are and how we feel. He gives the example that there are many people who are falling in love online, through dating sights and social media sites, without ever meeting each other face to face.

When looking at the negative attributes of CMC that are brought up; it’s too slow, it’s difficult to tell what the other person is really like, and that people lie online, I can’t help but think of the Brad Paisley song “Cooler Online” (2007). In the song they talk about a guy who is 5’3” and overweight, but as soon as he logs in to MySpace, he is 6’5”, drives a Maserati and is a black belt in karate. He says that he grows another foot and looses weight every time he logs in. As much as the song is supposed to be a comedy, there is definitely some truth to the lyrics. There are plenty of people that lie about their physical features, profession and hobbies to take on a different identity; however, there is a much darker side to some of the people who lie about who they are online. There is a frightening amount of people who are using the internet to target other internet users, whether it is for financial reasons, through identity theft, or sexual predators that are portraying somebody that they’re not, the internet can also be a scary and intimidating place. Dr. Walther insists that the internet is like a big city that you are unfamiliar with and to approach it with caution, and the code of ethics to keep your work and your play separate (Walther, 2012).
"A SIP Instead of a Gulp"

Time is cited as the key determinant as to whether nonverbal cues achieve the same amount of intimacy as verbal cues in face-to-face communication (Griffin, 2012). Walther argues CMC communication can lead to equally strong relationships as FtF provided additional time. Walther highlights two features of CMC that provide a rationale for the SIP Theory. The first is verbal cues, when people are motivated to form impression, CMC users can create fully formed impressions of others based solely on the linguistic content of computer-mediated messages. The second is extended time, the exchange rate through CMC is much slower than face-to-face, so the impressions are formed at a much slower rate. Even if CMC takes more time there is no reason to believe CMC relationships will be any weaker than those developed with the benefit of nonverbal cues. (Walther, 1996)

The “SIP instead of a gulp” acronym suggests a metaphor of a liquid or drinking analogy. If someone hands you a big glass of water you can do one of two things, you could gulp the glass fast or “SIP” the water slow. That big gulp is similar to being face-to-face with someone you just met and want to know better. This all in approach to drinking the water is like flooding the conversation, verbally and nonverbally, to make for a faster impression. If you sipped the glass then you would still drink the water; however, it would be at a much slower rate. That is what’s happening with CMC users that are thirsty for information. They end up with the same quantity and quality of water or in this case interpersonal knowledge, however it just accumulates at a slower rate.

As well as not looking at industry specific examples, this theory also does not frequently speak to or define the types of CMC that are most effective and preferred, and also does not specify if and how location plays a part in the consumers use of CMC or lack thereof. For example, is an account that is in a rural, less populated area less likely to participate in computer-mediated communication, than an account that is in a more populated city? Also to determine if the preferred method of CMC is different between the rural and urban locations.
Philosophical Assumptions

Rubin, Rubin, Haridakeis and Piele (2010) describe communication and technology as mediated communication and how people fulfill their entertainment or informational needs by using technologies such as computers, cell phones, MP3 players, and digital video cameras. Scholars examine the impact of the technology on people, groups, organizations and society. They also consider how people use and technologies to enhance, complement, or substitute for face-to-face communication (Rubin, Rubin, Haridakeis and Piele, 2010, p. 5).

Technology is an essential part in most everybody’s day-to-day routines, especially when it comes to communicating with one another. Everyone has a computer and phone, which both have become mobile to accommodate people who are constantly on the move. These technologies, such as laptops and cell phones, give us the chance to be connected to the world 24 hours a day, 7 days a week. Technology is essential to communication in both your personal and your business life, but when do you turn “it” off, or when is it okay to send an email to a person who is sitting two feet away from you. What effects does technology have on interpersonal relationships, both positive and negative?

The rapid advances in information and communication technology provide greater opportunities for today’s sales professional to establish, nurture, and sustain long-term relationships with their customers than ever before (Winer, 2001). With this, companies have been racing to add the latest and greatest technology that may give them a leg up on their competition. This brings up a few research issues. First, how do customers develop and choose their preferred method of CMC? Recent work in this area (Sullivan and Thomas, 2004) focuses on the purchase, catalog versus online. However, the selection of a sales channel to make a purchase is going to be different than selecting a communicated channel. Second, what is the purpose of each form of the CMC that the customer uses, such as searching for information, purchasing, transaction, and after-the-sale service? How do you find the successful blend of the multiple communication channels to deliver great service?
Computer-Mediated Communication

Computer-mediated communication (CMC) is the root of all communication interactions through technology. CMC is defined by Walther (1996) as any communicative transaction that occurs through the use of two or more networked computers. While the term has traditionally referred to those communications that occur via computer-mediated formats (e.g., instant messages, e-mails, chat rooms), it has also been applied to other forms of text-based interaction such as text messaging (Thurlow, Lengel and Tomic, 2004). These forms of communication can be divided into two modes, synchronous and asynchronous modes. In the asynchronous mode, the parties involved are logged on at different times, and in the synchronous mode, the parties involved are logged on at the same time and reacting to each other’s messages (McQuail, 2005). Studies show that most people favor asynchronous communication like email and text messaging for delayed, controlled and longer messages. They also prefer email for negative emotion as they are distant from the receiver. On the other hand, people favor synchronous communication like Instant Messaging for immediate good news. According to Santra & Giri (2009):

Synchronous CMC is similar to a telephone conversation, except that much of the communication in the former is text-based while the latter is voice-based. In the asynchronous mode, those who wish to communicate with others can do so in their own time and place without the need for face-to-face contact. This is advantageous to many people, in both administrative and academic situations. Managers and administrators are able to make use of technology for meetings, while instructors and students are able to use it for teaching and learning purposes (p. 103).

CMC such as email or computer conferencing can help to maintain continuity and connection across multiple conversations, especially for employees working in different locations (Marwick, 2001). Computer-based communication not only facilitates new means of educating students, it also prepares a
large segment of the next generation to enter the workplace with the ability to use CMC, and by doing so, serves to increase their value as organizational employees (DeRosa, Hantula, Kock, & D’Arcy, 2004). There are many reasons that organizations are choosing to use CMC to conduct business; these include decreasing costs, increased accessibility of information, and rapid exchange of documents, databases, and messages (Siegel, Dubrovsky, Kiesler, & McGuire, 1986). Sproul and Kiesler (1986) found that the use of email speeds and extends the flow of information across organizations. Electronic communication is less formal; it reduces organizational barriers, and conveys information that would otherwise not be submitted.

**CMC vs. FtF**

There is a good amount of research that has been conducted that has offered theories to explain the inherent differences between computer-mediated communication and face-to-face (FtF) communication. Early CMC/FtF experiments typically used zero-history problem solving groups with limited time in which to reach a decision. Findings revealed differences in interpersonal, as well as, message frequencies. Possibly because they had to type to communicate, CMC participants exchanged fewer messages in the same time period as FtF groups.

Social Information Processing Theory (SIP) supports online communication, and proposes that despite the inherent lack of cues found in the nonverbal communication of online interactions, there are many other ways for people to create and process personal, or individualized, information (Walther & Parks, 2002). Instead, people seek out and interpret cues that serve as substitutes of nonverbal communication, such as the use of emoticons and time stamps. Several comparable aspects, such as replaced cues, asynchronous communication, insightful interaction, desire for impression management, and maintained partner affinity, are all in support of SIP as a comparable, if not improved, alternative to FtF communication. (Walther & Parks, 2002)
One highlight of online communication is its asynchronous nature, in which one can carefully create and craft messages. Walther sites this as a key factor in both understanding the benefits of online interaction, as well as helping to determine whether their messages can achieve the level of intimacy that others develop face-to-face. Because the sender of a message does not exude natural nonverbal cues, one can manage attitudes within CMC. Another study compared 10 minutes of FtF conversation with 40 minutes of CMC and found no difference in partner affinity between the two modes (Griffin, 2009). Walther also found that, proportionately, CMC partners ask more questions and disclose more about themselves than do their face-to-face counterparts. In this way, CMC may actually improve or assist FtF interactions (Farrer & Gavin, 2009). Finally, similar to FtF interaction, people motivated in online interactions with others also wish to "reduce interpersonal uncertainty, form impressions, and develop affinity" (Walther, 1992).

CMC in the Workplace

Outside of the office, you are likely to see someone talking, texting or emailing on their Smart phones. Sales representatives are more productive on the road when they’re armed with laptops and wireless access to keep them connected 24/7. But while everyone gets excited about the newest technologies and the ability to be in touch with everyone, wherever they are at in the world, nobody seems to be paying much attention to the consequences of all this information. At what point does the endless communication due to these electronic outlets become information overload?

According to Frank Hoen, “Making Yourself Heard”, people are spending as much as 20 percent of their workday reading and responding to e-mail. For somebody who works an eight-hour day, that’s more than an hour and a half just managing e-mail (Hoen, 2006). A range of employees in a variety of workplace contexts, are increasingly asked to competently utilize a growing list of computer-based communication technologies. Thus, anxiety about new technologies is an especially significant issue for organizational members. Unfortunately, employees often do not feel prepared to competently use
most new communication technologies (Rosen & Weil, 2000; Seibold et al., 1992). This fact, coupled with negative physiological reactions to new technologies (ranging from discomfort, headaches, heart palpitations, and nausea to avoidance and withdrawal from the technologies themselves), demands further analysis of this issue in the organizational context (Rosen, 2001). As Rosen (2001) explained, it is critical that the corporate world is aware of the impact that technological change has on people . . . who are feeling frustrated by the rapid pace of technological advancement and are telling us by their actions that unless their needs are addressed they will remain hesitant or resistant (p. 250).

Scott & Timmerman (2005) contend that in the workplace, where new technologies may be formally implemented as part of a planned change, users may still resist or avoid these tools, minimize use, and/or choose other channels for communication and anxieties about communication may be an important part of such behaviors (p. 688). While studying the effects of CMC, Frank Hoen, looks at the negative effects that constant communication may have on one’s health, he declares (2006):

The concept of information overload is becoming a real nightmare for many executives. People don’t know how to switch off, or feel they can’t, and so are always in touch, no matter what time of day or night. Not only can this overload have an effect on our mental and physical health, at least one study has suggested that it contributes to conditions ranging from stress to irritability to heart problems and hypertension. It provides a significant challenge to internal communication teams that are trying to make their messages heard among the noise and electronic chatter that is today’s digital workplace (p. 35).

Sales professionals are always trying to stay one step ahead of the competition and with these new technologies, some are turning the average nine-to-five workday into being on “call” 24/7.
The Trust Issue

According to a team of researchers at the University of Michigan, Bos, Olson, Gergle, Olson, & Wright (2002):

Long distance collaboration is a fact of life for an increasing number of workers. More relationships are being formed and maintained online than ever before, including supplier-purchaser relationships, student-teacher relationships, and even collaboration between employees of the same company. Interpersonal trust is an area that is likely to be affected by mediated communication, but that has not been researched enough.

In order to work together effectively, co-workers and businesses must be able to trust one another. Without trust, information may not be shared openly. What is trust? Trust is best defined as a “willingness to be vulnerable, based on positive expectations about the actions of others” (Bos, Olson, Gergle, Olson & Wright, 2002, p. 1).

Previous research shows that it can be more difficult to develop trust in an online setting than face-to-face. Rocco (1998) found that six-person groups playing a social dilemma game were able to achieve cooperation quickly and maintain it throughout the experiment when they were face-to-face, but were unable to do so when communicating via email (p. 498). Wilson (2000) also found that trust was inhibited when three-person groups interacted via email rather than face-to-face, although in this study, the effects diminished over time. This is consistent with other experimental studies of CMC, which have shown that text-based interaction is less effective for tasks that have high social-emotive content. Previous research has also shown that text-based CMC increases the sense of social distance between participants, reduces pressure to conform, and may encourage uninhibited behavior. These
characteristics might make trust agreements harder to form and maintain. (Bos, Olson, Gergle, Olson & Wright, 2002).

**Efficiency through Technology**

Technology has become a way of life within the American culture in both personal and occupational aspects. Cellular phones, iPads, Google Docs, and many other new wave technologies have changed the business world into an efficiency machine, provided the tools and proper training. The focus of business in the Twenty first century has shifted from a sales memo sent through the Postal carrier to meeting in real time via the internet in multiple locations. In a study conducted by Pew’s Research Center’s Internet and American Life Project, there was a dramatic increase of the 3001 Americans surveyed that purchased a cell phone or laptop computer in 2008 (Zickuhr, 2011). This trend in technology powered communication mediums has continued to grow ever since. It is now the day in age where anything can be found on the internet in some capacity, even the Vatican Library collection that holds some of the oldest religious texts. (Santra & Giri, 2009) Time is money in corporate America and those who lack in the training or expertise in this area may find themselves unemployed and unmarketable.

With an estimated 85% of Americans owning a cell phone and 70% own a laptop computer, communication technology is at the fingertips or mouse click of almost all Americans under the age of 65 (Zickuhr, 2011). It has become the norm to communicate, bank, entertain, work, date, gamble, and learn all through the medium of technology. Although technology has affected almost every aspect of life, this study will give primary focus on the effect it has had in the corporate world, more specifically, the sales force. A new era has emerged where successful working relationships require the idea of being “always on”. Technology has given both the customer and the employee the tools to be working at all times regardless of time, place, company, or situation. A Customer may inquire about a product during the football game on Saturday night to multiple competitors and may expect an answer by
Sunday morning. The company to respond the fastest is most likely to have the deal closed by Monday morning. This may prove to be a huge disadvantage to the sales representative who maintains a work life balance in which he or she is not “always on”. The pressure to be “always on” from the consumer aspect to the employer aspect has created an environment when work communication could potentially become continuous. (Kleinman, 2009)

The overall view of computer mediated communication in organizational communication is that it increases communication efficiency. Kleinman (2009) raises concerns about the effect that this intense efficiency of communicating through computers may have on the users. She suggests that those who become “always-on” users are more likely to fall into a pattern of presenteeism, which is the opposite of absenteeism. The “always-on” user disturbs work life balance by overworking and having the need, expectation, or desire to check email, converse with clients, etc during family life time. Kleinman suggests that this state of “always-on” can cause physical and mental health issues that may result in CMC becoming a less efficient strategy. (Kleinman, 2009) The overall trend and belief among corporate America today is that, despite Kleinman’s concerns, computer mediated communication has made companies more efficient.

Effective Customer Communication

Focusing the broad topic of computer-mediated communication within the corporate world down to the front lines of any company, sales, will help to take an in depth look into the sales process using CMC. Personal sales have generally been characterized by the face to face interaction between the costumer and the sales representative. There have been numerous studies completed in this arena of research, most of which focus on the effectiveness of the face to face sales approach. The result of
this historical exploration for the key to creating an effective salesperson has focus primarily on the content of the communication (Soldow & Thomas, 1984).

Soldow and Thomas break this sales communication down into two different segments: content and the actual form of the message. This reasoning is derived from Relational Communication theory based on the thought that content is only part of the communication exchange. The other portion of the exchange is made up of intention which will dictate conversation dominance, deference, equality and ultimately the outcome. An effective salesperson has the ability to do all of these aspects with finesse based on the communication cues of the customer. The research conducted by Soldow and Thomas has shown that the relational communication in a face to face sales interaction can be the key to closing the next big deal. This study will be strongly considered as our digitized sales force moves away from face to face relational sales and into a world of computer mediated negotiations.

The Effect of Technology on Sales

Computer-mediated communication is geared towards technology use in the general sense of communication; however, when CMC is broken down in specific areas of communication, there are subcategories of CMC, such as sales technologies (STs). Organizations are investing billions of dollars into sales technologies, e.g., customer relationship management and sales automation tools, to improve sales force effectiveness and efficiency. Past studies have looked at the relationship-forging tasks that are critical to the link between sales technology and the performance of a salesperson. The function of which buyers and sellers are exchanging information in the business markets have changed dramatically over the years. Over the past decade, sellers have placed increased strategic emphasis on building relationships with buyers (Cannon & Perreault, 1999) and investing in information technology (IT) for sales force applications (Shoemaker, 2001). Sales is a major factor in any successful organization, and sales teams are fighting hard to establish, build and maintain good relationships with their customers. According to “Increasing Sales Effectiveness by Blending CMM and CRM” Jim Dickie states (2004):
Considering the current state of the buyer-seller relationships, it is not surprising that in a recent worldwide study of 1300 companies, executives ranked sales force effectiveness second only to revenue generation as their top priority (p. 58).

A typical organization spends an estimated $5,000 to $15,000 per salesperson to equip him or her with the appropriate technology (Erffmeyer & Johnson, 2001). Salespeople now have the growing opportunity use this technology to become better communicators with a larger number of clients and customers.

There are many sales-based customer relationship management (CRM) technology tools that are specifically designed to increase the effectiveness of the sales force to meet its objectives in managing customer relationships. There is growing interest in identifying the appropriate tools for sales personnel that improve sales force productivity (Morgan & Inks, 2001), particularly sales force automation (SFA) and customer relationship management. These technologies are giving the sales representatives the ability to complete their routine day-to-day tasks much faster and easier, to free up more face-time with their customers, or time to work on other desired areas of business. Specifically, relationship building performance with customers is the extent to which the salesperson performs activities that cultivate a relationship that mutually benefits the selling and buying firms (Hunter & Perreault, 2007).

Mobile technology, in particular, gives salespeople many advantages in rapidly reaching a large customer base. Furthermore, customers are increasingly employing mobile technology, making them increasingly accessible by online messages (Norris, 2007). The adoption of mobile technologies continues to grow rapidly. The fact that laptop sales are far outgrowing those of the personal desktop computer shows that we are living in world where mobility is imperative. Like laptops, the demand for wireless (Wi-Fi) access points is becoming just as important. While more and more businesses are
offering free Wi-Fi, some salespeople are going a step further and purchasing personal wireless cards so they don’t have to worry about finding the closest Wi-Fi hot spot, this is important for sales representatives with rural routes.

Like laptops, the adoption of smart phones is growing rapidly. The majority of phones in the market today are smart phones, which offer computer-like capabilities, internet, digital cameras, MP3 players, calendar and scheduling software, QWERTY keyboards, and instant messaging and email. You can have your work voicemail forwarded to your email, which is ultimately synced to your smart phone. Having the internet gives you the World Wide Web at your finger tips, while being able to take a picture of a needed item or a malfunctioning product and send it through email to the appropriate source. In response to these mobile technologies, many companies now offer sales force productivity software. Marketed as mobile sales force automation tools, these highly customizable mobile solutions include tools for customer resource management, lead development, project management, and inventory control. A recent survey revealed that companies that implement mobile sales force automation are 1.5 times more likely to see an improvement in sales force productivity than those that do not (Aberdeen Group, 2007). Industry experts recommend that mobile technology adoption should be aligned with corporate business strategies and should enhance how information flows within the organization (Kleynhans & Feiring, 2006).

**Research Questions**

Based on the review of research, computer-mediated communication is a relevant part of our everyday lives and is only growing more prevalent by the day. It is apparent that the research concentrates on the effects of CMC on our social lives and how we communicate with each other, and research that concentrates on business effectiveness, however there isn’t strong data that bridges the two together. These questions will help gain insight on the relationship between computer-mediated
communication and sales productivity and communication between a sales representative and their customers.

**RQ1:** What are the communicative methods used in Food Service sales and for what purpose?

**RQ2:** Aside from face-to-face, what is the customers' most preferred method of communications?

**RQ3:** What effects, both positively and negatively, does CMC have on interpersonal relationships in sales?
Chapter 3: Scope and Methodology

Scope
This study explored how technology impacts interpersonal relationships in sales, by concentrating on computer-mediated communication (CMC), and how the buyer-seller relationship not only thrives on CMC, but also depends on it. Sales methods and results have continuously improved over the years as technology has become an important tool for a salesperson. The scope of this research study is moderate and focuses on the consumers’ perception of how technology impacts the way in which they communicate with their sales representatives and vice versa. The context of the study is moderate due to the fact that the research is being conducted within a small region of the U.S.

Methodology
A qualitative research method was chosen for this study. Qualitative research methods offer certain advantages for this research case for a few reasons; (i) it allows the researcher to gather in-depth understanding of the phenomenon under investigation; (ii) seeks to understand a given research problem from the perspectives of the selected samples through investigation; (iii) provides detailed descriptions of how people experience a given research issue; and (iv) also allows the researcher to pursue new areas of interest (Wimmer and Dominick, 2006). A thorough interview uses a more focused sample but also provides background about the use of CMC in buyer-seller relationships and how the interviewees perceive the value and effectiveness of CMC as a communication method in the relationship.

The method of qualitative research that was chosen was ethnography. Ethnography refers to a research methodology that has been developed for the study of cultures and cultural sense-making. This sense-making may not be far apart from the practices that you use in everyday life to understand your own surroundings (Eriksson & Kovalainen, p. 137). Ethnography is field research that emphasizes providing a very detailed description of a different culture from the viewpoint of an insider in the culture.
to facilitate understanding of it. Ethnography is used to form objective descriptions of social norms and events as they occur. When attending to the physical and social ecology of the communication setting, ethnographers try to explain the regularities of how people behave in social situations (Rubin, Rubin, Haridakis, & Piele, 2010). This study explains the social rules of interaction through computer-mediated communication in a buyer-seller relationship, by observing different participants in the field of the study. This form of research was chosen due to the fact that the author is directly involved with the subject that is being researched on a daily basis and has access to many participants, both costumers and sales professionals. The study will include patterns of behavior, use and frequency of communication channels and the pros and cons, by collecting first-hand data. Interviews will be conducted to check the accuracy of these observations.

There is a relatively long but rather thin history of anthropology and ethnography in business research. A range of studies on management and organizations that focus on how people in specific work settings make sense of their day-to-day actions and situations (Barley and Kunda, 2004) form a methodologically specific field of research called ‘organizational ethnography’ (Schwartzman, 1993). The objectives of this ethnographic study will look at understanding the impact that technology has on both the sales professionals and of the consumers, in which both are users of the products and services of CMC.

**Data Collection and Data Analysis**

To collect the data, six semi-formal interviews were conducted face-to-face with owners and operators of restaurants within an average sized sales route. The selected participants were selected at random and vary in locations, age, size of establishment, and length of relationship, and were based on volunteer sampling. However, although they were selected at random, they were selected from a probability sample, being that the researcher knows the likelihood of the members of the populations that is being included.
The participants were asked for their perceptions on the use of technology in their everyday life, as well as the use of CMC for work related tasks. Six to seven open-ended questions were asked of the participants, which included questions on the types of communication channels that are used, the purpose of the usage and the most frequently used channel. The participants were also asked about the integration of new technologies are being used in their establishments by their employees and in their interactions with sales representatives or vendors and the preferred communication channel used of these interactions (See Appendix A).

The interviews were conducted at the participants’ establishments over an average interview duration of 30 to 60 minutes. All of the interviews were recorded using a digital voice recorder and were later transcribed for analysis by the author. The data from the interviews were then analyzed following Miles and Huberman’s (1994) framework for data analysis (Creswell, 2007), in which the researcher (i) manually summarizes and categorizes the raw data into codes and themes; (ii) develop patterns from the codes and themes; (iii) make comparisons between the interviewees’ responses; and (iv) directly interpret the data according to the research questions set in this study.
Chapter 4: The Study

Introduction
To communicate effectively, it is important to select the appropriate media to ensure its value and efficiency (Ean, 2011, p. 5). The purpose of this study is to examine the effect that technology or more specifically computer-mediated communication (CMC) has on the interpersonal relationships in sales. Six semi-formal face-to-face interviews were conducted with owners and operators of restaurants within a sales route in the southwestern area of Michigan. Communication is the transmission of message from one to another. The interview was designed to determine three main points, 1) the definition and channels of CMC, 2) who uses CMC and why or why not, 3) the advantages and disadvantages to their choice. In addition to the interview, participant-observation was used throughout the time of the study as another means of collecting data. This chapter will review the answers that were given, the observations that were made and how the data was collected, reviewed, and then explore the results found. In closing there will be a discussion on the perceived effects that CMC does have on interpersonal relationships within a sales route.

Data Analysis
During the interview, each owner/operator was asked a series of nine (9) questions about computer-mediated communication and the effect that it has on each one of them individually. The interviews took place at the establishments of each of the respective owner/operators. The interviews were recorded in order to produce the unstructured data for analysis. The interview was conducted to determine what the perception is of CMC and the preferred methods used by the individuals that were interviewed. Qualitative research interviews try to understand something from the subject’s point of view and to uncover the meaning of their experiences. Interviews allow people to convey to others a situation from their own perspective and in their own words (Kvale, 1996). In qualitative program evaluation, open-ended responses to questions provide the evaluator with quotations, which are the main source of raw data. Patton (1987) notes that quotations "reveal the respondents' levels of
emotion, the way in which they have organized the world, their thoughts about what is happening, their experiences, and their basic perceptions. The interviews were conducted with Kvale’s six steps of analysis in mind.

**Six steps of analysis (Kvale p. 189-190)**

1) Subjects describe their lived world during the interview.

2) Subjects themselves discover new relationships during the interview, see new meanings in what they see and do.

3) The interviewer, during the interview, condenses and interprets the meaning of what the interviewee describes and ‘sends’ the meaning back, ideally until there is only one possible interpretation left or the multiple understandings of a theme by the subject are known.

4) The transcribed interview is interpreted by the interviewer, either alone or with other researchers. The material is first structured. Then follows clarification by for example eliminating digressions and repetitions and distinguishes between the essential and the non-essential. The analysis proper involves developing the meanings of the interviews, bringing the subjects’ own understanding into the light as well as providing new perspectives from the researcher on the phenomena.

5) A re-interview. The subjects get the opportunity to comment on the interviewer’s interpretations as well as elaborate on their own original statements.

6) A possible sixth step would be to include action. Subjects begin to act from new insights they have gained during the interview.
Participant-Observation

Observation is the most widely used method of collecting data for ethnographic research (De Walt and De Walt, 2002). The most essential characteristic among observational strategies concerns the extent to which an ethnographer participates in the activities that they are studying. The degree of participation varies from complete immersion, to taking on a role as an outside observer. Within this study the researcher shared the everyday life and activities of the participants in the selected setting. The general relationship between researcher and researched can vary in at least three different ways, and this variation gives differing perspectives on the ways the information flow, confidentiality, consent and other research-ethics-related questions are discussed (Elliott, 1988).

A. The researcher can be detached and remain neutral and distant to the research object; researched are subjects, data sources and respondents in a research setting.

B. The researcher can be marginally participant (participant-observer) in the research and researched are informants.

C. The researcher can actively participate in activities and enable changes to take place, perhaps also making changes, as facilitator, change agent or enabler. Those researched are collaborators in the research.

The observational style chosen for this study was participant-observation, in which a relationship between the researcher and researched was present, due to the close and intimate familiarity with the given group of participants and their practices through an intensive involvement with people in their cultural or in this case occupational environment, over an extended period of time. An extended research time period means that the researcher is able to obtain more detailed and accurate information about the individuals under study. The researcher not only observed participants on his own route and took from his past interactions with his customers, but also observed a secondary sales route, where the data was compiled during two twelve hour days. The data was collected and
recorded through field notes. Field notes are the least structured way to record observations.

Originating from the field of anthropology, using field notes in extensive evaluations means recording your observations in a narrative, descriptive style as you notice or hear something of importance. There was no predetermined item or behavior to observe, therefore there was no printed recording form needed.

Results
The data that was produced by the interviews was broken down into three main focuses: 1) the definition and channels of CMC 2) who uses CMC and why or why not, 3) the advantages and disadvantages to their choice.

To start the interview, the definition of computer-mediated communication was read to the interviewees, and then they were asked to describe what technologies came to mind after they heard the definition of CMC. The subjects were of a variety of ages ranging from 36 to 68, both male and female, and were from both urban and rural locations. The answers were analyzed and compiled into the frequency of each given response, represented in the chart below.

![Bar chart: What technologies come to mind when you hear CMC](image-url)
When asked to define what technologies came to mind when the participants heard CMC, e-mail and texting were the most frequent response, with video conferencing and online ordering and accounting as the next most frequent response. The participants claimed to use email and text frequently to convey short questions or statements that do not need immediate answers. Participant A stated that “I am very busy, and I don’t always have time to “chit chat” on the phone, and with the all of the new technologies these days with tablets and smart-phones, it is just as easy to shoot somebody a text or an email straight from your mobile device. It is a good way for me to keep record of our conversations also”.

Many interviewees stated that although the face-to-face interactions is still very important part of the interpersonal relationship between them and their sales representative, however CMC is a great way to send or receive additional information and feedback as reminders or textual proof of communication after a face-to-face interaction. Face-to-face communication, however, is used more frequently when communicating more sensitive issues or issues that need immediate attention. Participant C stated that “I’m old-school, and still prefer to communicate face-to-face or at least over the phone. That way I know that my issues have been addressed and there is no way for my message to get lost or misunderstood.”

This study addresses the use and influences of computer-mediated communication as communication platform in a buyer-seller relationship in the food service industry. During the interviews participants discussed the frequent use of email, text and other CMC, the preferred use of these methods as an effective communication channel. In the food service industry, online ordering and accounting is becoming more common with owner/operators. “Being able to order on my time without having to worry about sitting down with my sales representative at a certain time, allows me to do a more thorough job ordering, because then I do not feel rushed” stated Participant F. When the orders
are placed online, it also frees up more time for the sales representatives to go out and make new бизнес calls.

Based on the findings of the interviews, CMC has a number of advantages such as: 1) accessibility; 2) increasing speed of communication; 3) time flexibility; 4) providing black and white reference or acting as reminders after face-to-face interactions; 5) sending routine information or instructions. The statements of advantages of CMC included:

Participant B: “Email and texting are ideal for me, because I can avoid all of the “fluff” and just get to the issue at hand, due to my busy schedule”

Participant D: “It is easy for me to just text or email someone a question, rather than calling them or waiting for the next time I see them”.

Participant E: “I own several establishments, so I never know where I am going to be and when, so I have a hard time with appointments or stepping away to talk. CMC eliminates that problem me”.

Participant A: “CMC gives me a chance to think through my orders, requests or questions before I send them and gives me a “paper trail” for my records”.

Although there are many advantages to communicating through CMC, the interviewees also claimed that there are some disadvantages. Resistance to change, creatures of habits, difficulty of access and the lack of non-verbal cues, such as facial expressions and body language, are a few of the disadvantages that the participants pointed out. The interviewees elaborated on the disadvantages of CMC in the following statements.

Participant C: “I don’t have texting or email on my phone so it is just as easy for me to call when I need something or need an immediate answer”.
Participant F: “Unless the relationship is built up and maintained prior to the implementation of the CMC, it is challenging to do so, plus it is hard to replace a handshake and a smile”.

Participant A: “Sometimes distance can grow between me and my sales rep if I am ordering online and communicating only through CMC, they don’t think that they need to stop by. If that’s the case, what is the need for the sales rep then”?

According to the six interviewees, the most used channels of CMC are email, texting, online ordering and accounting, social media, online inventory and video conferencing. The most frequently used or most preferred method of CMC seems to be emailing and texting, as shown in the charts below.
From the interviews, five out of the six participants stated that email as the most preferred and effective way to communicate with their sales representatives. Emails are being used for the purpose of delivering both personal and work related information, such as questions, pricing, orders, etc. The interviewees claimed that:

Participant A: “When I just need to add an item to my order or if I have a question on pricing, email is the best option for me to receive accurate feedback”.

Participant B: “Email allows me to fully explain myself when I need to pass along information or if I have a question and allows me to do so at the time that it is fresh in my mind”.

Which form of CMC do you prefer

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Participant E: “In the restaurant business, we work a lot of late hours, so if I think of something late at night, I do not want to call and wake up my sales rep for a question, but I may forget my question by morning, that is when email comes in handy for me”.

**Discussion**

The primary purpose of the research was to investigate and identify the positive and negative impacts that computer-mediated communication has on interpersonal relationships in sales, and focused on the specific industry of food service. The study was able to capture the personal perspectives of multiple participants that work in the food service industry and have multiple interactions with sales representatives on a weekly basis.

The theory that guided this study was Social Information Processing Theory, which was developed by Joseph Walther in 1992, is an interpersonal communication theory that explains the ways that people get to know one another online, while lacking nonverbal cues, and how they use a computer-mediated environment to develop and manage their relationships. In the prior research it was argued that CMC or online relationship development may require more time to develop than the more traditional face-to-face relationships. Within this theory an analogy of “A SIP instead of a gulp”, as in drinking water, was given to explain how communication senders and receivers will end up with the same amount of water (information), however it accumulates at a slower rate when using CMC. Therefore Walther argued that CMC communication can lead to relationships that are just as strong as FtF relationships given the additional time.

The theory supports my findings that CMC can be and is a viable means of communication, however is perceived as much more appropriate once a good interpersonal relationship has already been established through face-to-face interactions. Through the initial face-to-face communication and
building of the relationship is when and where the buyer and seller discuss adequate means and methods to communicating through CMC. During this time, the buyer and the seller can not only establish the alternative communication methods, but also create any limits or boundaries if any are deemed necessary by both parties.

Technology has become an important mean of communication, both personally and professionally. Zickuhr (2011) confirmed this statement by showing that an estimated 85% of Americans own a cell phone, while over 70% own a laptop computer. Within this study 100% of the participants, both observed and interviewed, owned a cell phone and had access to a computer, both laptop and desk-top, for work. It is very common for people to use CMC for banking, entertainment, gambling, dating and information seeking, as well as for work and personal reasons.

According to Erffmeyer and Johnson, 2001, a typical organization spends an estimated $5,000-$15,000 per sales representative to equip them with the appropriate technology. Sales professionals are continuously trying to gain the upper-hand on their competition, and with all of these new technologies many sales professionals are ignoring the nine-to-five approach and are answering various forms of CMC once they are home, creating the “always on” mentality. When communicating after-hours, people are more likely to communicate through CMC, therefore giving the receiver more time to react to the initial message.

The research showed that the participants of the study preferred email and text messaging for their means of communication through CMC. These results tie into previous CMC research, which showed that most people favor asynchronous communication, logged on at different times, like email and text messaging for delayed, controlled and longer messages. They also prefer using these CMC methods when sending negative information (Santra and Giri, 2009). In addition, when using asynchronous communication, it gives the sender and receiver enough time to edit their
communication, making these interactions in CMC more controllable, while also reducing stress of the immediate feedback that is required in face-to-face interactions. However, when communicating positive information people favor face-to-face or synchronous communication, logged on at the same time, such as instant messaging, video conferencing, etc. to be able to see the positive reaction of the person receiving the good news. This study looked at the impact of CMC in sales and how the technologies improve, complement and at times substitute for face-to-face communication.
Chapter 5: Summaries and Conclusion

Limitations of the Study

There were multiple limitations found in this study. The first limitation is the ever changing evolution of technology and the fact that the current preferred method of CMC can be replaced at any time when the next new and improved technology is released. Just a few years ago texting and social media were not included in scholarly research on CMC, or having access to the internet from your cell phone, due to the fact that these technologies were not around when those studies were being completed. The fact the technologies that are discussed in this study could be obsolete within the next couple of years may also make the entire study out of date and obsolete.

The lack of prior research on CMC in the food service industry is the next limitation that occurred in this study. A wide array of academic research has focused significantly on CMC in the past decades, which indicates the importance of CMC in organizational and interpersonal communication (Lee and Varey, 1998). There are consistencies with this study and previous research, on a broad scale, however there aren’t many, if any, academic research articles on an industry specific scale, which makes it hard to draw off any prior conclusions. Different industries have different normality and trends, therefore broad conclusions may hold true with some industries, but may not in others.

The final limitation is that the sample size of this study is such a small portion of the overall population of the food industry that it is hard to make a general conclusion and sum up an entire industry, just by the findings of this small piece of the pie. Time and accessibility were key factors for being unable to establish a larger sample size. Not only was the participant size small, but so was the geographical area of which the sample group was established in. Trends and norms may be different in different parts of the state, region or country.
Further Study and Recommendations

In order to gain a better understanding of the overall effect that computer-mediated communication has in the food service industry, more research must be done on this specific industry. By researching larger sized sample groups from multiple locations around the United States and more data has been analyzed, there may be a better overall understanding of the effects that CMC has.

In addition, once this data is collected and analyzed in different regions throughout the U.S., there will be a better idea of whether location plays any part into the number of participants that do choose CMC as their preferred way of communication. Furthermore, it would be useful for upcoming researchers to study a larger group of members from the food service industry while extending the geographical boundaries to obtain more data from multiple parts of the country.

The frequency of the research conducted would be a benefit in order to stay up to date with the ever changing world of technologies. Research would have to stay constant to stay relevant with the current technology trends. With the inventions such as tables, notebooks and better smart-phones, there constantly will be new devices coming out that will only give an owner/operator faster and more convenient means to communicate.

Conclusion

Based on the literature review, it is safe to say that technology has become an ever-growing part of our everyday life and has a profound impact on how we interact with one another both in business and personally. From the results that were gathered, CMC is a great way to communicate after an interpersonal relationship has already been established. CMC is a great convenient way to communicate, however it does not take the place of face-to-face communications.

The data that was collected in this study showed that emailing and texting are the most frequently used and preferred methods of CMC that are being used today. With the evolution of online
ordering and online accounting in the food service industry, these tools have become a popular trend amongst restaurant owner/operators. Some restaurants are starting to use tablets as way to order food, manage their inventory and are even replacing their menu with these tablets. Time will tell just how far technologies come and the constant affect that it has on interpersonal relationships in sales.

Due to the developing advances in communication technologies, today’s sales professionals are provided with a great opportunity to establish, build, and maintain relationships with their customers. Customers like that fact that they do not have to wait on for the next time their sales representative comes in to ask them a question or pass along general information. The overall understanding of computer-mediated communication in a buyer/seller relationship is that it has a positive impact on the communication efficiency. Technology has equipped both the buyer and seller with the necessary tools to communicate effectively regardless of time or place.
References


APPENDICES

APPENDIX A: INTERVIEW GUIDE

Interview Questions

*Computer-mediated communication (CMC) is defined as any communicative transaction that occurs through the use of two or more networked computers.*

1. When you think about computer-mediated communication what technologies come to mind?
2. How have your perceptions and use of CMC changed over time?
3. Do you use any type of computer-mediated communication (CMC) with your sales representatives? *(If the interviewee answers yes, please ask the (a) questions, if they questions no, please use the (b) questions).*

2a. If so, what types of CMC do you currently use?
2b. If not, why do you choose not to use CMC and do you ever see yourself doing so in the near future?

3a. What are the advantages to using CMC?
3b. What are the advantages to choosing not to use CMC?

4a. What are the disadvantages to using CMC?
4b. What are the disadvantages to not using CMC?

5a. Did you choose to use CMC to communicate with your sales rep or did he/she suggest it to you?
5b. Have any of your sales reps suggested that you use CMC to communicate and explained the benefits?
6a. For what purposes do you use CMC (ordering, accounting, questions, personal, etc.)?

6b. What purposes could you see yourself using CMC?

7a. Which form of CMC do you prefer to use and why?

7b. Why do you prefer face-to-face communication over CMC?

8a. How frequently do you use CMC in a week?

8b. How frequently do you communicate with your sales rep face-to-face?

9. Does the location (rural/city) of your establishment affect your use of CMC?