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Professor Dale Sullivan  
NDSU

Dear Professor Sullivan:

Enclosed you will find the report that was requested concerning the discourse practices in my field.

This report was completed with information gathered by observing the working practices of the employees of General Equipment & Supplies which included an interview with Corey Stockstad, Parts and Service Operations Manager at General Equipment & Supplies. I also investigated the paper documents produced in the normal business operations of General Equipment & Supplies.

I hope this report sheds some light on some of the communication practices within the heavy equipment sales industry. If you have any further questions please feel free to contact me.

Sincerely,

Stephen H. Stafki  
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Junior-NDSU

Enclosure

# **Discourse in the Field of Heavy Equipment Parts Sales**

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## **Abstract**

In monitoring the communication practices of the heavy equipment parts sales industry I found three distinct communication methods that I felt bore investigating for this report. They were email, written (paper) discourse, and spoken discourse. I felt that these types were worthy of investigation because of either the sheer number of uses of one type of mode or the overall significance of the mode. Interestingly though within all the types presented here, even the untrained eye can pick up the theory that no matter what your message was, if it wasn't presented correctly the message would die quickly. All of the employees of General Equipment & Supplies of Fargo, ND, where the data was gathered, seem to place an extremely high value on speedy and accurate information. As decisions are made and business plans are set into motion, the quantity and quality of the information being provided to make the decisions is constantly being monitored. The ability to provide this timely information is critical to the success of the company and the success of the individual within the company.

## **Discourse Practices within the Heavy Equipment Industry**

The purpose of this report is to document some of the different discourse practices used in a heavy equipment parts sales dealership. This report was compiled to create a window into their world. This was done by gathering paper documents, analyzing current employee practices and interviewing Corey Stockstad, Parts and Service Operations Manager at General Equipment & Supplies of Fargo, ND.

This research is necessary because of the variety of discourse that is possible within this industry and tries to answer the questions of why each type is chosen in different situations. There appears to be many differences in the discourse choices of individuals within this dealership. Some individuals rely heavily on electronic communication; some are face to face people, while others utilize whichever type is most efficient for the situation.

The different types of communication appear to be quite specialized based upon the information that is provided and the audience that it is being presented to. The information contained in the discourse can be specific, but the format is basically general for that particular audience. Each situation that different groups must deal with will require its own special genre to accomplish the task of communicating effectively the information put out (Berkenkotter & Huckin, 1995). The dynamical nature of a genre within a group is a result of the responses that communication in the past has brought out. This allows for stability when communicating within a group (Berkenkotter & Huckin, 1995). Then one has to throw in the fact that the type of communication, or medium, will also dictate how the information is presented and received (Porter, 1992).

We use primary and secondary speech genres as well in our communications within a group (Berkenkotter & Huckin, 1995). These different concepts of speech allow us to differentiate between how we deal with different people in our lives (Bakhtin, 1986).

To sum this all up, every facet of how people communicate will change by the group and the medium that we are using, but within our different groups the genre will remain the same. This dealership is no different. Although there are variations in the individuals at this dealership there is an overriding theme that is detectable.

Within this report I will touch on three types and several subtypes within each main category. I did not concentrate all my efforts on just one particular facet or document from this industry as I felt that would limit my scope too narrowly. I decided to pursue three types after my interview with Mr. Stockstad. His insights into their communication practices allowed me to achieve a deeper understanding of the subjects.

First I started analyzing their use of email. How they use it to communicate their policies, business practices, general information, vendor reports, and when they use email to add a dose of humor to their days.

Next I delved into the written communication practices that they use. Within this grouping I looked at their policy manual, and customer and vendor letters.

Finally I studied how they used the spoken word in handling their everyday business. I broke this down into two main categories of phone conversations and face to face interactions. Within the face to face interactions I divided this category into private conversations, group meetings, and business procedural meetings.

It is my hope that this report will allow for clarification of how this segment of the work force communicates.

In researching these discourse practices I employed several techniques to gather information useful to this report. To name a few; I monitored the face to face interactions of the various employees of General Equipment & Supplies and their reactions from

different situations. I monitored company emails and received permission from Don Shilling, President of General Equipment & Supplies to review the company policy manual. Lastly, I interviewed Corey Stockstad, Parts and Service Operations Manager, to get a feel for individual preference for the different types of discourse.

## **Results and Discussion**

In all types of business, communication is one of the most vital issues that the individuals within the different businesses must handle. In researching the realm that is a heavy equipment dealership, this was proved time and time again. I hope to show in this report that the many ways that the employees chose to communicate and the reasoning behind their choice of the different mode.

### ***Email-***

Place yourself in a world without email. I can't even fathom it! The endless uses that exist within the business setting make this the number one choice of communication at General Equipment & Supplies as far as quantity is concerned. They are a group that relies heavily on the internet and the ease of email. According to Mr. Stockstad, it is the most used communication tool that is used because of its record keeping capabilities, but he also offers a warning, saying, "With email you have a greater chance for misinterpretation..." I will go through some of the information that is disseminated using email at General Equipment & Supplies and it's usefulness to them.

#### **Policy/Business Practices**

These are two important uses of email at General Equipment & Supplies. Email is a quick and easy way to make sure that all affected employees have a copy of the latest company directive. The policies/practices that were sent out using email were not however of the type that spelled out how legal and personnel issues were to be handled; these were done in a paper format and will be covered later in this report. These policies/practices would speak to issues such as how the flow of information should progress, or in how reports should be generated and interpreted. In monitoring these types of emails a distinct pattern was glaringly obvious. There was an intentional lack of emotion from the writer and one could tell that a conscious effort had been made to answer all the questions that a reader may come up with. The writers did however give the reader the option to contact them for any clarification of the email that may be needed, but interestingly enough the questions and answers would not be forwarded to all individuals who received the original email, just in case other readers had the same questions. In talking to other readers of the same email this was a problem that would come up time and time again, but only about a tenth of the readers needing clarification would actually ask for it. Thus one of the problems with email is that if you don't understand the email it is so easy to delete it and plead ignorance when confronted with breaking the policy within the email.

## Informational

Looking at informational emails that were sent out through the company they would vary in scope dramatically. Everything from new pregnancies, new parking lot configurations or the fact that a new machine has been sold are all candidates for a company or department wide email. The tricky thing with informational emails seemed to be able to match the content with the audience. In my interview with Mr. Stockstad one of his concerns with using email is the potential that an unintended audience may receive your information. An employee may feel the need to send a friend an email bragging about not doing anything, but that friend is upset because he has had to cover for that individual all day. Now, the upset employee has the slacker in his own words to forward to their boss. This type of pitfall was glaringly obvious in one particular instance. General Equipment & Supplies is directly connected to the energy industry, with supplying machines to wind tower generation companies and to coal mines. One employee has some views that are not so favorable to coal mines and absentmindedly carbon copied the entire company on an email that was meant for a select group of coworkers that derided the industry. Needless to say, once it was explained to the employee that a good portion of her check came from that coal mine she issued an apology to the General Equipment & Supplies employees.

Now even with the pitfalls of spreading information on the internet the good definitely seems to outweigh the bad at General Equipment & Supplies. Many employees will save all the informational emails from a particular person or group of people, in one folder for reference a year or two later. One person can create an email and in seconds a hundred other people know what action they need to take based on that email, and not one phone was ever picked up. The company's reliance on email to spread information is at the point where the times when their email system was down, it seemed to present an overbearing hardship on all the users.

## Vendor Report Submissions

I only wish to briefly mention this particular type of email because I wish to show that the reliance on email systems is not limited to this particular dealer. In fact the vendors that this dealer utilizes that do not have internet web pages or email addresses for their employees are looked at as second rate operations and in my opinion dealt with a tad more caution. The major vendors of General Equipment & Supplies require certain General employees to send monthly reports to them so the vendor can better forecast the need that is in the system. Instead of waiting for mailed reports or having to stand by a fax machine they can access all the necessary data from the dealerships that the vendor contacts and using that data the vendor can better prepare the vendor to help the dealership out.

## Humor

Ah yes, everyone loves a good joke. The employees at this dealership are no exception. Even though company policy states, "Email may not be used to solicit others for commercial ventures, religious or political causes, outside organizations, or other non-business matters" (Item# 516 Employee Handbook), the spread of jokes through the email system is rampant. I have found that the individual who wrote the policy is actually one of the worst offenders when it comes to non-business emails. Granted, that 99% of the non-business email that circulates within this company is clean and in relatively good taste, but

there are those that do cross the moral boundary. If the individuals who propagate the filth are caught they could be in for severe disciplinary actions.

### Email Summary

In closing on the subject of email at General Equipment & Supplies, it is a valuable tool that creates wonderful opportunities for communication in an instant. The user must remember though that the message is only going to be as good as the sender makes it. So the end result from their message will only be as good as the message itself.

### ***Written (Paper) Discourse-***

In reviewing the written discourse that is distributed by paper methods at a heavy equipment dealership I noticed a distinct lack of distributed paper material. In fact according to Mr. Stockstad only 15% of his communication is in the form of paper material. There was in fact only 3 types of paper discourse that bear mentioning. They are the policy manual, customer letters, and vendor letters.

### Policy Manual

The policy manual for General Equipment & Supplies is a document that is a governing document for the company in relation to human resource issues. It is a document that is totally devoid of emotion, with statements such as, "Employees may request up to 24 hours of parental leave for school visits within any calendar year."(Item# 328 Employee Handbook). This document tries to answer any and all questions that may arise concerning issues that may face employees and the resources that are available to them. It isn't a document that needs a whole lot of explanation as to the details, and the format is not exactly awe inspiring or eye catching. It is truly a functional document.

### Customer Letters

This type of paper discourse is used actually very sparingly. When communicating with customers the employees of this dealership seemed to favor face to face or phone contact more than not. Only when a record of what was said was needed did they put their words to paper. It seemed that this was because of the relationships that they have with most of their customers that using paper discourse would be considered too formal for the situation. Items that would be covered in paper discourse would be a survey, a quote, offering a promotional program, or following up on a customer complaint.

### Vendor Letters

This category of discourse is of varied importance to this distributorship. In any given day upwards of 20 different manufacturers would contact General Equipment & Supplies. Of those 20, approximately 19 would find the trash can within moments of the envelope being opened. In fact most of the letters would not even make it to the addressed employee. This is because of the proliferation of mailing lists being sold within this



industry. Manufacturers spend hundreds, if not thousands of dollars every year on mass mailings to distributors such as General Equipment & Supplies in hopes that a handful will pursue the information that they are presenting in their mailing. One would ponder on the wisdom of this practice. Perhaps the strategy of the mass mailers should concentrate on cleaning up their existing list and cultivation of new leads through networking and trade shows. All in all this is a widely used practice, but in the case of this dealership, a highly ineffective one.

### ***Spoken Discourse-***

#### Phone

This mode of communication is extremely important to the heavy equipment industry if this one distributor is an indicator. One individual alone uses over 1,500 cell phone minutes each month in the normal course of business. In any given hour 20-30 phone calls may come in to be distributed to the different departments. Much credence is given to how customer calls are handled. To be more explicit, phone calls with customers, although not directly monitored are given such high importance that employees are given refresher classes in how to answer and talk on the phone. The phone is the main mode of contact that this distributor has with its customers because of the wide area that their customers live in and the national respect that they have with their product. In fact their customer base includes individuals from not only neighboring states but also states all over the nation and some Latin American countries as well. Excellent phone etiquette is essential in the day to day operation for the success of the company.

#### Face to Face

I saved this category for last just because of the intricacies involved in direct personal contact. In fact I further categorized face to face contact to private conversations, meetings, and business procedural conversations.

#### Private Conversations

At any given moment at this dealership 10-15 one on one conversations are taking place. As Mr. Stockstad says, "...it allows for immediate exchange of information with an opportunity of a deeper understanding and verification that the message is understood and allows for quicker exchange of ideas." Even in the age of Instant Messaging, and email, most employees here relish the personal contact and the acknowledgement of another person. In listening to the conversations taking place one will hear topics ranging from customer issues, processing problems, to the potty training of children. Being able to see the other person's reactions and build relationships with coworkers and customers is definitely a driving force in how a mode of communication is picked. Although email may be the most prolific, private conversations are probably the most appreciated.

#### Meetings

This company utilizes meetings to handle many issues. Some types of meetings include the following; Inter/Intradepartmental meetings, customer issue meetings, event committees, management, strategy, **Vital Factor Teams**. Vital Factor Teams are groups of individuals from different departments that are put together to handle issues that arise within

the company. The team will then research the problem, create a solution and then report back to the company of how the problem should be handled. This way issues are resolved by committee and no department is left out of the loop. There are detractors of the many meetings that are organized at this distributor, but in reviewing all the work that is done by the meetings, the good seems to far outweigh any negatives.

#### Business Procedural Conversations

This is a fairly limited topic, yet one that I felt was worth covering. These discussions deal mainly with managers deciding in groups of 2 to 3 how the departments would handle issues that arose. These are issues that were outside the scope of the VFT's covered earlier in this report. These discussions are not organized formally, rather the managers would gather as the need presented itself. There seemed to be urgency for issues to be handled while they were "hot", because if they were not the issue would be placed on the proverbial back burner and would die a quick death.

### ***Conclusion***

In review of the limited amount of information that was gathered in relation to this report it is fairly obvious that communication is a vital tool in the successful heavy equipment dealership. Not only is it a tool, but one that the company would ultimately fail without. This operation is extremely dependent on the talents of many individuals and their ability to brainstorm and work together towards profitability. I do not believe that the employees always consciously choose the modes of communication that they use, rather, the ability to rapidly share information with coworkers has become part of their culture. Thus when choosing how they will communicate the individual worker already knows the best method, and in most cases how they need to formulate their message for optimum understanding.

Communication practices in this field will ultimately continue to evolve and companies will employ more advanced methods of sharing data, but no matter what the mode, the ability to share that data will continue to be of vital importance.

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Interview with Corey Stockstad March 1, 2004 Parts and Service Operations  
Manager

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