

Scripting: A new way of finding out what your users really expect.

Journal of the IT Service Management Forum December 2002

NEIL MCBRIDE
Centre for IT Service Management
De Montfort University

Imagine you went into a fast food restaurant such as McDonald's and were greeted by a waiter in an evening suit who ushered you to a candlelit table, with champagne ready to serve. You might be surprised, disoriented and worried. You have pre-defined expectations of what will happen in a McDonald's service encounter. These expectations have been learnt by previous experience of fast food restaurants, and by what you've seen on television or been told. This script for a fast food restaurant visit provides guidance on how to behave and how you will view the service encounter.

Scripts are cognitive structures that organise sequences of events in a particular context. They are structures, stereotypes and generalised sequences of events, which define roles, actions and outcomes in a typical situation. The idea of scripts was developed in the seventies, for use in artificial intelligence programs. Recently, they have been seen as a useful tool for examining service encounters and comparing customer and provider expectations. In any service encounter, participants take up roles and then carry out the actions they have memorised in their scripts. The purpose of the script is to achieve a goal such as eating a meal or getting a haircut. In an extensive service interaction, the main goal may be broken down into sub-goals, with scripts invoked to achieve each sub-goal.

For a script to be activated, we must firstly possess knowledge about the service. For example, we must know about fast food outlets and have a script which we can use. Secondly, the script must be evoked by the context (for example, it's lunchtime, or we're hungry and near to a McDonald's). Thirdly, we must actually carry out the script by entering McDonalds and purchasing and eating a meal. As the customer invokes their script, so the provider responds by invoking their script to fulfil the customer's goal.

So how do we get these scripts out of people and how do we use them to improve service quality in a service encounter? In particular, how can this help us improve the helpdesk service?

Scripts need to be obtained from both the customer and the service provider. Firstly, the participant may be interviewed to get some information on their use of the helpdesk, and their attitude to it. This may help in the interpretation of the resulting scripts. Next the participant is asked to write down a sequential list of the activities which they would carrying out in a service encounter with the helpdesk in order to resolve a problem. In our research we provided the participant with examples of unrelated scripts such as, for example, hairdressing:

MAKE APPOINTMENT
ENTER
WAIT
WASH HAIR
CUT HAIR
PAY.

Showing the participants examples of unrelated scripts ensures that we are not influencing their helpdesk script. We want to know what the participants' helpdesk service encounter is really like, not what they think we want it to be. Other unrelated scripts such as a visit to the GP, or a restaurant visit may serve this purpose equally well. Once the participant is shown a script, they are given some time to write out their own script, which is then collected for analysis. This should be done with all the helpdesk staff and a sample of customers from a range of organisational departments.

In analysing the resulting scripts, the real value comes from comparing customer and provider scripts. A number of questions can be asked:

Where do they start and finish? In a study that looked at the hairdressing service encounter, there was a significant mismatch between starting points of the scripts. Hairdressers considered that the service encounter script started when the customer entered the salon. The customer considered the service script to begin when they rang up or visited in order to make an appointment. Clearly such a mismatch has consequences for service quality. If the service provider is taking no notice of a part of the script which is important to the customer, then a quality gap will emerge.

How elaborate are they? Generally the service provider's script will contain more detail and be more elaborate than the customers - or at least it should be. If the customer is identifying more actions and being more elaborate than the provider then something may be wrong and the detailed aspects of the service encounter need to be carefully looked at by the service provider.

Is there anything present in a customer script that is not in the provider script? If the customer includes actions that the provider is not responding to, this represents another gap and another quality worry.

Who else is involved? A customer or provider's script may identify other roles in the service encounter. We need to ask how they relate to the main service encounter and whether the other role that appears is adding to or subtracting from the quality of the service encounter. For example, that other role could be the supporting information system.

What are the key actions? As you collect a number of scripts you may find that certain actions crop up again and again and are given prominence. These might be critical points, perhaps potential sources of conflict.

Let's look at a couple of scripts from a real helpdesk which were obtained following interviews and explaining what a script is with the participants. Firstly, a script for a helpdesk operator:

SCRIPT TYPE: HELPDESK

MAIN GOAL: RESOLVE QUERY

ACTIONS:

ANSWER PHONE
GREET CUSTOMER
ADD CUSTOMER DETAILS
ADD MACHINE DETAILS
ADD DEPT DETAILS
ADD LOCATION DETAILS
ASK QUESTIONS
ADD CUSTOMER COMMENTS TO CALL
AGREE PRIORITY
THANK CUSTOMER
ALLOCATE CALL
END CALL.

This script starts when the phone is picked up and ends when the call is allocated to an engineer. Note the level of detail concerning information requirements. This script may be driven by the requirements of the helpdesk computer system for information. But is any of that information of importance to the customer? Another example script for a helpdesk operative was even more detailed in terms of actions associated with the help desk system:

SCRIPT TYPE: HELPDESK

MAIN GOAL: RESOLVE QUERY

ACTIONS:

SWITCH PC ON
LOG INTO PC
OPEN UP CALL SYSTEM
LOG INTO PHONE SYSTEM
PICK UP UNFINISHED WORK
ANSWER PHONE
GREET CUSTOMER
TAKE CUSTOMER DETAILS
OPEN CALL

CUSTOMER DETAILS APPEAR
ASK QUESTIONS
ADD CUSTOMER DETAILS
ADD MACHINE DETAILS
CONFIRM CUSTOMER DETAILS
CONFIRM MACHINE DETAILS
AGREE PRIORITY
CALL REF
RESPONSE TIME
ALLOCATE CALL

Now let's compare the above scripts with an end-user script:

SCRIPT TYPE: END USER

MAIN GOAL: RESOLVE QUERY

ACTIONS:

CALL HELPDESK
WAIT FOR REPLY
GIVE NAME
GIVE LOCATION
EXPLAIN PROBLEM
REPLY TO SECONDARY QUESTIONS
AGREE PRIORITY
CALL REF
WAIT
ENGINEER ARRIVES
DESCRIBE PROBLEM IN DEPTH
LEAVE ENGINEER TO RESOLVE PROBLEM
RESPOND TO SECONDARY ENQUIRY BY ENGINEER
NOTE WHEN PROBLEM FIXED
WAIT (LATER)
RECEIVE CALL FROM HELPDESK
GIVE SATISFACTION RATING
END

How do these scripts differ? Firstly, they end in different places. For the end-user, the visit of the engineer is just as important as the call to the helpdesk and is seen as part of a seamless service encounter. Secondly, WAIT events feature prominently. The helpdesk operators do not seem to be aware of these waits. Also, the fact that they have been written down by the end user suggest they are important. Thirdly, the helpdesk operators detailed computer dialogues are reduced to REPLY TO SECONDARY QUESTIONS in the end user's script. The information requirements of the helpdesk system are of little

interest to the customer. The computer system is probably inhibiting an effective service encounter.

Looking at several scripts, say half a dozen or so, may highlight significant general differences or similarities. Here all the customers mentioned GIVE SATISFACTION RATING. Only one helpdesk operator indicated a parallel action of CHECK CUSTOMER OK. All operator and end-user scripts mentioned AGREE PRIORITY. I suspect this is a pivotal event and may be a source of conflict.

Overall these few scripts tell us that we've got some problems to deal with. Our helpdesk operatives need to understand the concerns of the end-users. They must ring back to check and be aware of the importance of satisfaction ratings. They must concentrate on the customer, not the computer input. Perhaps a different helpdesk system is needed, or the basic information can be obtained beforehand so that operators concentrate on the problem. The end-user's waits should be acknowledged and perhaps recorded as a service measure. Perhaps we should study the AGREE PRIORITIES step to see if there are any problems or conflicts.

Finally, while most helpdesk operators wrote in GREET CUSTOMER as an action in their scripts, only one identified LISTEN as an action. Since listening is an important part of any helpdesk service encounter, and in itself a difficult skill, perhaps some training in listening skills is needed. After such training, we should then carry out the script writing exercise again and see how the scripts have changed.

I recommend scripting to you as a simple way of finding out what people's expectations of the helpdesk service encounter really are and identifying gaps between the mental models of helpdesk operators and customers. Some of the differences may be surprising and the exercise could lead to significant improvements in the quality of the service encounter.