

EMPOWERING YOUNG ENTREPRENEURS THROUGH BUSINESS COMMUNICATION TRAINING AND COMPLAINT HANDLING

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ABSTRACT

This community engagement program aims to improve business communication competence and complaint handling skills among young entrepreneurs who are members of the Young Entrepreneur Success (YES) community in Semarang. The main problem faced by the participants is the limited ability to communicate effectively when responding to customer complaints, particularly in digital transactions, which may reduce customer satisfaction and loyalty. The program was implemented through participatory training methods consisting of interactive lectures, group discussions, case simulations, and role-play activities on customer complaint management, as well as mentoring in developing standard operating procedures (SOPs) for customer service. A total of 45 young MSME entrepreneurs from various business sectors participated in this activity. The results indicate an improvement in participants' understanding of empathetic communication, strategies for responding to customer complaints, and their ability to develop and implement SOPs for complaint handling in their business operations. This initiative contributes to the achievement of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), particularly Goal 8 on Decent Work and Economic Growth, by strengthening entrepreneurial capacity and improving service professionalism among young MSME actors.

Keywords:

business communication; complaint handling; young entrepreneurs; MSMEs; SDG 8

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INTRODUCTION

Micro, Small, and Medium Enterprises (MSMEs) play a crucial role in supporting national economic development in Indonesia. Recent data indicate that MSMEs dominate the business sector and contribute significantly to employment, accounting for more than 90% of total employment and serving as a key driver of economic stability and inclusive growth (Ministry of Cooperatives and SMEs, 2022; World Bank, 2020). Despite this substantial contribution, many MSMEs in Indonesia are still managed in a simple and individual manner. This condition is also reflected among members of the Young Entrepreneur Success (YES) community in Semarang, where most entrepreneurs operate their businesses independently without dedicated staff responsible for customer service or complaint handling.

Based on interviews conducted with the coordinator of the YES community, many young entrepreneurs tend to focus primarily on production and sales activities while paying less attention to communication with customers. In fact, effective communication with customers, particularly in responding to complaints, has become increasingly important in today's competitive business environment. Consumers are becoming more critical of the products and services they receive, and they expect businesses to respond quickly and professionally to their concerns (Singh et al., 2016). Failure to address complaints properly may lead to customer dissatisfaction and damage the reputation of a business.

Further interviews with a YES member who operates a small-scale garment production business revealed that many MSME actors in the community have experienced customer complaints that were not handled properly. Most of them admitted feeling confused when dealing with dissatisfied customers, especially when the complaints involve emotional reactions such as anger or frustration. If such situations are not handled appropriately, customers may spread negative opinions about the business to others. This phenomenon aligns with the findings of Gruber et al. (2009), which indicate that ineffective complaint handling can trigger negative word-of-mouth communication and potentially harm business performance.

Several factors may trigger customer complaints in MSME transactions. A study conducted by Mumpuni (2023) found that complaints related to online MSME businesses in Central Java were mostly associated with product quality (32%), product specification mismatch (27%), and slow response from sellers (21%). These findings highlight the importance of improving business communication skills among MSME actors so that they can respond to complaints more effectively and maintain customer satisfaction. Indonesian Consumers Foundation (YLKI) reported that among 642 consumer complaints recorded in 2017, around 16% were related to online shopping experiences. The most frequently reported problems included slow responses to complaints (44%), undelivered goods (36%), unfair transaction systems (20%), and the absence of refund policies (17%). Other issues reported by consumers include fraud, product mismatch, defective products, cyber risks, and lack of transparency in pricing or information, which remain common challenges in online consumer experiences and digital marketplaces (Hassan et al., 2020; Singh & Srivastava, 2019).

Further analysis of customer complaints directed toward MSMEs that produce self-manufactured fashion products also reveals that product-related factors are among the most common causes of dissatisfaction. Complaints frequently arise due to perceived low-quality materials, inconsistencies between product descriptions and actual items, and delays in shipping. Examples of typical customer complaints include statements such as *“The product is not the same as the description and picture,”* *“The item is defective and the seller did not respond to my message,”* and *“The delivery took too long.”* These examples illustrate how both product quality and service responsiveness contribute to customer dissatisfaction. In addition, interviews with members of the YES community indicate that many small businesses manage their entire production, marketing, and customer service processes independently. As a result, complaint handling often becomes a secondary priority. Meanwhile, previous studies indicate that a significant proportion of online consumers experience dissatisfaction with e-commerce services, particularly related to delayed delivery, poor service quality, and inefficient complaint handling (Sohn & Tadisina, 2021; Jain et al., 2022). This situation further emphasizes the importance of improving communication competence and customer service practices among MSME actors.

Based on this situation analysis, the YES community faces several challenges in managing their businesses, particularly in the area of complaint handling. Many young MSME entrepreneurs lack the knowledge and skills necessary to manage customer complaints effectively. The problems experienced by the partners include the absence of standard operating procedures (SOPs) for handling complaints, limited communication skills when dealing with dissatisfied customers, slow responses to complaints, and limited use of digital platforms for customer service. Previous community-based programs have also highlighted the importance of integrating skill development with digital innovation to strengthen participants' practical competencies and sustainability. For instance, a study by Sinaga et al. (2024) demonstrated that combining training with digital-based outputs not only enhances participants' technical skills but also reinforces their capacity to adapt to evolving socio-economic and technological contexts.

Therefore, this community engagement program was designed to empower young entrepreneurs through business communication training and complaint handling. The program focuses on strengthening communication competence, introducing practical complaint handling strategies, and assisting participants in developing SOPs and digital customer service systems. By improving these capabilities, the program aims to enhance service professionalism and customer satisfaction among MSME actors while contributing to Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) 8 on decent work and economic growth through the development of competitive and sustainable entrepreneurship.

METHODS

The implementation of this community engagement program followed a structured process consisting of several stages designed to ensure that the activities were aligned with the program objectives. The stages included team formation, formulation of objectives,

stakeholder identification, needs assessment and analysis, prioritization of problems, preparation, training implementation, mentoring, and evaluation. These stages reflect widely adopted practices in community development programs that emphasize systematic planning, stakeholder participation, and continuous evaluation to ensure program effectiveness and sustainability (Kenny et al., 2017; Mathie & Cunningham, 2018). **1)** The first stage involved the formation of a community service team consisting of members with expertise in business communication, complaint handling, and MSME training. The selection of team members was based on their academic background, professional competence, and experience relevant to the needs of the partner community. A well-structured team is essential for ensuring that community engagement programs are implemented effectively and collaboratively (Widodo et al., 2019). **2)** After the team was established, the next step was to formulate the objectives of the program. This stage aimed to align the perspectives of all team members regarding the goals of the activity and the expected outcomes. Clear objectives help guide the design of the training activities and ensure that the program addresses the real needs of the partner community. **3)** The program also involved identifying relevant stakeholders who could support the implementation of the activities. Stakeholder identification is an important component in community-based programs because it ensures collaboration between different actors involved in the initiative (Freeman, 1984). In this program, the main stakeholders included members of the Young Entrepreneur Success (YES) community, academic facilitators, and supporting institutions such as local government agencies that have programs related to MSME development. **4)** To ensure that the program addressed the actual challenges faced by the partners, a needs assessment was conducted through interviews with members of the YES community. The purpose of this stage was to identify the main issues encountered by the participants, particularly in relation to complaint handling and business communication practices. The information collected from the interviews was then analyzed to determine the most relevant topics and skills that needed to be addressed through the training program.

Problem Prioritization

Based on the results of the needs analysis, the team identified the priority problems that required immediate intervention. The primary focus was placed on improving complaint handling practices and strengthening business communication skills among the participants. Prioritizing key issues is essential in community development initiatives to ensure that the program focuses on areas that have the most significant impact on partner sustainability and performance (Drucker, 2016).

Training Preparation

Before implementing the training program, the team conducted several preparatory activities to ensure that the training would run effectively. These preparations included developing training modules and instructional materials, arranging the training venue and facilities, and disseminating information about the program to potential participants through communication channels within the YES community.

Training Implementation

The training stage represented the core activity of the community engagement

program. The training was designed to combine theoretical understanding with practical exercises so that participants could apply the knowledge directly to their business practices. Several instructional methods were used during the training process. *First*, lectures were delivered to provide participants with fundamental knowledge about business communication and effective complaint handling strategies. Lecture-based training remains one of the commonly used methods in entrepreneurship capacity-building programs because it allows facilitators to deliver structured information efficiently (Rohmah & Pratiwi, 2021). *Second*, practical exercises were conducted through simulations and case studies based on real complaint scenarios frequently encountered by MSME entrepreneurs. These activities aimed to help participants develop practical skills in responding to customer complaints professionally. *Third*, Focus Group Discussion (FGD) sessions were organized to encourage interactive dialogue between participants and facilitators. FGDs enable participants to share experiences, discuss challenges, and collaboratively explore possible solutions to the problems they face, making them an effective method in participatory research and community-based programs (Nyumba et al., 2018).

Post-Training Mentoring

Following the completion of the training sessions, mentoring activities were conducted to support participants in applying the knowledge and skills gained during the training. Mentoring included consultation sessions and monitoring of participants' progress in implementing communication strategies and complaint handling procedures within their businesses. Mentoring is considered an important step in community programs because it helps ensure that the knowledge gained during training is effectively translated into real practice and sustained behavioral change among participants (Allen et al., 2017; Eby et al., 2018).

Evaluation and Review

The final stage of the program involved evaluating the effectiveness of the training activities. Evaluation was conducted through questionnaires, interviews, and observations to assess changes in participants' understanding and behavior related to complaint handling practices. The evaluation results were used as a basis for preparing the final program report and for developing recommendations for future community engagement initiatives. Systematic evaluation is important to measure the impact of training programs and to identify opportunities for improvement in subsequent activities (Riyadi et al., 2020).

agian ini menjelaskan pelaksanaan pada kegiatan pengabdian kepada masyarakat menjelaskan tahapan, pendekatan, dan teknik yang digunakan dalam merancang, melaksanakan, serta mengevaluasi program pengabdian. Metode disusun secara sistematis untuk memastikan bahwa kegiatan yang dilakukan mampu menjawab permasalahan mitra secara efektif dan berkelanjutan.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The community engagement program in the form of business communication, digital marketing, and complaint handling training for MSME actors in Semarang was implemented

in accordance with the proposed intervention plan. The activity involved young entrepreneurs who are members of the Young Entrepreneur Success (YES) community, with support from the Department of Cooperatives and MSMEs of Central Java Province. The training materials covered the development of standard operating procedures (SOPs) for complaint handling tailored to MSME characteristics, business communication strategies to improve customer satisfaction, and initial mentoring in establishing digital-based customer service systems. In addition, participants were introduced to the optimization of customer service features available on social media and e-commerce platforms that are commonly used in their daily business operations.

The training was conducted on June 18, 2025, at the Cooperative and MSME Hall in Semarang, attended by approximately 45 young MSME actors from various sectors, including fashion, culinary, services, and crafts. The program was organized through collaboration between Universitas Negeri Semarang (UNNES), the Department of Cooperatives and MSMEs of Central Java Province, and the YES community. The involvement of academics and students in facilitating the program also reflects a collaborative and participatory approach in community engagement.

During the training sessions, participants actively engaged in discussions, simulations, and experience sharing, particularly regarding communication challenges with customers and business competition. The use of interactive delivery methods, supported by a practical booklet entitled “*Communication Skills for MSMEs in the Digital Era*”, enabled participants to better understand applicable strategies. Several participants expressed that they gained new insights, particularly in recognizing that customer service does not end at the point of transaction but extends to how complaints are handled with empathy, professionalism, and long-term relationship orientation.

The results of the program indicate an improvement in participants’ knowledge and awareness regarding the importance of systematic complaint handling and the utilization of digital platforms to strengthen communication with customers. Participants demonstrated increased understanding of empathetic communication, faster response strategies, and the need to establish structured SOPs in managing customer complaints. These findings are consistent with previous studies emphasizing that effective complaint handling significantly contributes to customer satisfaction and loyalty (Alharthey, 2020; Hassan et al., 2020). Moreover, communication competence plays a critical role in reducing negative emotional responses from customers and enhancing service quality, particularly in service interactions involving complaints and dissatisfaction (van Vaerenbergh & Orsingher, 2016; Islam et al., 2021).

The interactive training approach, which combined lectures, simulations, and focus group discussions, also proved to be effective in enhancing participants’ learning experience. This aligns with prior research indicating that participatory and practice-based training methods can significantly improve entrepreneurial skills and problem-solving abilities among MSME actors (Rohmah & Pratiwi, 2021). The inclusion of real-case simulations allowed participants to directly apply theoretical concepts to practical situations, thereby increasing their confidence in handling customer complaints.

Another important finding is the shift in participants' perspectives regarding business competition. Rather than perceiving competitors as threats, participants began to view them as motivators for continuous improvement and innovation. This change in mindset is crucial in fostering resilience and adaptability among young entrepreneurs, particularly in highly competitive digital markets. The involvement of the YES community and the Department of Cooperatives and MSMEs has strengthened the continuity of the program. Follow-up plans, including online mentoring forums, have been prepared to monitor the implementation of the knowledge and skills gained during the training. This continuous support mechanism is essential to ensure that the impact of the program extends beyond short-term knowledge acquisition to long-term behavioral change and business improvement (Eby et al., 2018; Johnson et al., 2020).

In addition to the observed improvement in technical skills, the training also revealed a shift in participants' awareness regarding the strategic role of communication in shaping customer experience. Many participants initially perceived complaint handling as a reactive activity that needed to be addressed only when problems arose. However, through the training process, they began to understand that communication with customers is an ongoing process that extends beyond transactional interactions. This shift is particularly important in the context of digital business, where customer experiences are often shared publicly through online platforms. As highlighted in recent studies, customer experience in digital environments is strongly influenced by how businesses respond to service failures, and timely, empathetic responses can significantly mitigate dissatisfaction and prevent negative electronic word-of-mouth (Jain et al., 2022; Hassan et al., 2020).

Another notable outcome of the program is related to the participants' growing awareness of the importance of standardization in service processes. Prior to the training, most MSME actors did not have structured guidelines in handling customer complaints, resulting in inconsistent responses that depended heavily on individual judgment and emotional conditions at the time. Through the introduction of complaint handling SOPs, participants were able to develop a more systematic approach in managing customer interactions. This finding supports the argument that structured service recovery processes can improve consistency in service delivery and enhance perceived fairness among customers, which ultimately contributes to higher levels of trust and satisfaction (van Vaerenbergh & Orsingher, 2016). In this context, the SOPs developed during the program serve not only as technical tools but also as a framework for professionalizing MSME service practices.

Furthermore, the integration of digital platforms into customer service strategies emerged as a critical aspect of the program's impact. Participants were encouraged to utilize existing features in social media and e-commerce platforms, such as automated responses, chat management systems, and customer feedback tools, to improve responsiveness and service efficiency. This approach reflects the growing importance of digital customer relationship management in small business contexts, where limited human resources often constrain service quality. Previous research suggests that the effective use of digital tools can enhance communication efficiency, reduce response time, and improve overall customer

satisfaction in online transactions (OECD, 2020; Islam et al., 2021). In line with these findings, the participants demonstrated increased readiness to adopt digital-based service practices, indicating that technological adaptation can serve as a key enabler for improving MSME competitiveness in the digital marketplace.

This community engagement program contributes to the achievement of Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) 8, which focuses on promoting decent work and economic growth. By enhancing communication competence, improving service professionalism, and strengthening digital capabilities among MSME actors, the program supports the development of sustainable and competitive entrepreneurship. The findings highlight that strengthening customer service quality, particularly through effective complaint handling, is a key factor in ensuring business sustainability in the digital era.

CONCLUSION

The community engagement program conducted by the team from Universitas Negeri Semarang in collaboration with the Young Entrepreneur Success (YES) community in Semarang was successfully implemented and achieved its intended objectives. Through a series of training sessions, mentoring activities, and the application of appropriate technology in the form of complaint handling SOPs and practical booklets, young MSME entrepreneurs demonstrated improved competence in business communication, particularly in responding to customer complaints effectively and maintaining their business reputation in the digital environment. The program also enhanced participants' awareness of the importance of ethical, empathetic, and professional communication as a key factor in business sustainability. Furthermore, the developed tools proved to be practical and applicable, enabling participants to organize customer service processes, evaluate communication performance, and strengthen their business image across digital platforms. This initiative contributes to the achievement of Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) 8 on Decent Work and Economic Growth by enhancing the capacity and competitiveness of local MSMEs. For future development, continuous mentoring through online forums or business clinics is recommended to support participants in implementing the acquired skills, while further innovation in the form of interactive digital modules is suggested to expand the program's reach. Strengthening collaboration among universities, government institutions, and entrepreneurial communities remains essential to ensure sustainable and impactful MSME empowerment.

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