communicative decisions, the competent communicator considers how to be both effective *and* appropriate. We believe the theories described in this book will help you achieve your communication goals by providing an indication of both what should be done as well as how you should do it.

## CONCEPTS, MODELS, AND THEORIES

The term **theory** is often intimidating to students. We hope by the time you finish reading this book you will find working with theory to be less daunting than you might have expected. The reality is that you have been working with theories of communication all of your life, even if they haven't been labeled as such. Theories simply provide an abstract understanding of the communication process (Miller, 2002). As an abstract understanding, they move beyond describing a single event by providing a means by which all such events can be understood. To illustrate, a theory of customer service can help you understand the poor customer service you received from your cable company this morning. Likewise, the same theory can also help you understand a good customer service encounter you had last week at a favorite restaurant. In a professional context, the theory can assist your organization in training and developing customer service personnel.

At their most basic level, theories provide us with a lens by which to view the world. Think of theories as a pair of glasses. Corrective lenses allow wearers to observe more clearly, but they also affect vision in unforeseen ways. For example, they can limit the span of what you see, especially when you try to look peripherally outside the range of the frames. Similarly, lenses can also distort the things you see, making objects appear larger or smaller than they really are. You can also try on lots of pairs of glasses until you finally pick a pair that works best for your lifestyle. Theories operate in a similar fashion. A theory can illuminate an aspect of your communication so you understand the process much more clearly; theory also can hide things from your understanding or distort the relative importance of things.

We consider a communication theory to be any systematic summary about the nature of the communication process. Certainly, theories can do more than summarize. Other functions of theories are to focus attention on particular concepts, clarify observations, predict communication behavior, and generate personal and social change (Littlejohn, 1989). We do not believe, however, that all of these functions are necessary for a systematic summary of communication processes to be considered a theory.

Although similar to at least two other terms, we want to be careful to differentiate theories from other abstract notions. First, a **concept** refers to an agreed-upon aspect of reality. For example, *time* is a concept, as is *love*, the color *orange*, and a *bitter* taste. All of these notions are abstract, meaning they can be applied to a variety of individual experiences or objects and can be understood in different ways. That is, you might love your cat in a different way than you love your mother; you might think time drags when in a class you don't much like but that it speeds up over the weekend; and you might hate the color orange and love the bitterness of certain foods. However, in and of themselves these concepts are not theories; they represent an effort to define or classify something, but they do

not provide insights into how or why we experience them in a particular way. Typically, theories provide a way to predict or understand one or more concepts. So, a definition of communication described earlier is a concept, but how that definition is used to explain the communication process is a theory.

A second term you might confuse with theory is a **model**. Part of the confusion you might experience is because the term *model* is used in at least four ways (Gabrenya, 2003; Goldfarb & Ratner, 2008): as a synonym to the term *theory*, as a precursor to a theory (a model is developed and eventually becomes a theory), as a physical representation of a theory (i.e., a diagram such as the one that appears for expectancy violations theory in Chapter 3), or as a specific—often mathematical—application of predication (e.g., a researcher might develop a mathematical model to predict which job categories are going to be in high demand in upcoming years). Because of these varying ways of understanding a model, we believe the term *theory* is preferable when talking about systematic summaries of the communication process.

## THREE TYPES OF THEORY

Of central interest is the importance of theory for people in communication, business, and other professions. Our definition of theory suggests that any time you say a communication strategy *usually* works this way at your workplace, or that a specific approach is *generally* effective with your boss, or that certain types of communication are *typical* for particular media organizations, you are in essence providing a theoretical explanation. Most of us make these types of summary statements on a regular basis. The difference between this sort of theorizing and the theories provided in this book centers on the term *systematic* in the definition. Table 1.3 presents an overview of three types of theory.

The first summary statements in the table describe what is known as **commonsense theory**, or theory-in-use. This type of theory is often created by an individual's own personal experiences or developed from helpful hints passed on from family members, friends, or colleagues. Commonsense theories are useful because they are often the basis for our decisions about how to communicate. Sometimes, however, our common sense backfires. For example, think about common knowledge regarding deception. Most people believe that liars don't look the person they are deceiving in the eyes, yet research indicates this is not the case (DePaulo, Stone, & Lassiter, 1985). Let's face it: If we engage in deception, we will work very hard at maintaining eye contact simply *because* we believe liars don't make eye contact! In this case, commonsense theory is not supported by research into the phenomenon.

A second type of theory is known as **working theory**. These are generalizations made in particular professions about the best techniques for doing something. Journalists work using the "inverted pyramid" of story construction (most important information to least important information). Filmmakers operate using specific camera shots to evoke particular emotions in the audience, so close-ups are used when a filmmaker wants the audience to place particular emphasis on the object in the shot. Giannetti (1982), for example, describes a scene in Hitchcock's *Notorious* in which the heroine realizes she is being poisoned by her coffee, and the audience "sees" this realization through a close-up of the