

## Abstract

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### Conversation and Interaction - A Study of Customer Service Representatives in Two Industrial Companies

A point of departure for this study is that industrial companies are changing the ways in which they communicate with customers. The introduction of Internet-based systems or outsourcing customer service to call centres are examples of this. Customer service representatives are often the focus of this change. When technological systems replace their work, it is often said that the system will do it more effectively and that customer contacts will improve. This made me wonder about how customer service representatives actually work, both in their organizations and when interacting with customers. I also identified a lack of convincing evidence of how customer interaction takes place.

I have taken a closer look at how customer service representatives work in industrial companies and have provided an understanding of their practice as well as analyses of conversations between them and customers. I have given insight into some episodes of customer interaction that have taken place. The studies were made in two manufacturing companies - one in the building industry and one in the chemical industry. In both companies, the customer service representatives were subject to major changes. The methods used are interviews and observations. The observations include listening to conversations between customer service representatives and customers. My analysis is based on grounded theory and conversation analysis which is used to get a detailed understanding of the structure and interaction in the conversations. Beside orders, the conversations are concerned with sharing information and problem solving. The conversations are also important for reducing uncertainty between the two parties and for clarifying what the customers want.

The results of the study also show that customer service representatives have more essential roles in industrial companies than previous studies indicate. Among other things, they provide information about their interaction with customers to sellers. This information can then be used by sellers in their contacts with customers and also in maintaining customer relationships between these conversations. They also act in a way that shows a high degree of commitment towards their customers. The study shows how various degrees of commitment are expressed through their promises and other verbal interaction with customers. Most of the conversations between customer service representatives and customers may be characterised as a joint achievement, where both participants are active in reaching a mutual understanding and agreement about future actions. In most episodes, questions and answers are used to reach that understanding.

**Key words:** customer service representatives, industrial companies, customer service, interaction, episodes, commitment, conversation analysis.

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