



UNIVERSITY OF GOTHENBURG

**THE CUSTOMER IS ALWAYS RIGHT**  
**Telephone based customer service communication styles**  
**that lead to customer satisfaction**

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## Abstract

This study deals with a telephone based customer service and the communication styles that make the communication in this setting successful or unsuccessful.

Many companies in Sweden have a telephone based customer service, and often times the customer's initial contact with the company is through the customer service. This is why the future of a company may depend on the quality of its customer service, and the implications and suggestions are given in order to answer the question of which communicative styles lead to customer satisfaction in a telephone based customer service.

An online survey was created in order to get the data, and the answers from one hundred participants were analysed. A combined method of quantitative and qualitative analysis was used to get the results. The quantitative method was used to get the age, gender, and country of birth numeric differences, and the statistical data, and the thematic analysis was used in the qualitative method, in order to get the qualitative data.

The results show the positive connection between the so called 'warm' styles of communication and the customer satisfaction, and the negative connection between the cold, impersonal communicative style and the customer satisfaction. The correlation with the theoretical implications, shows that finding the right style of communication, thus providing every customer with the personalized, not tailored to fit all service, leads to gaining a satisfied and loyal customer. Managerial, and suggestions for interpersonal communication employee training according to the customer needs, are given in the last section.

Keywords: interpersonal communication, customer service, communication styles

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# 1. Introduction

## 1.1 Background

The success of a company depends on many factors, but for the past three decades the focus has shifted from the pure gaining of profit to customers whom the profit actually depends on. Thanks to the market competition, and a surplus of service providers, many companies realized that providing a distinguished customer service is a way to gaining and maintaining customers (Abu-ELSamen et al 2011).

When talking about a customer service, there are several factors that define what a customer service is. For the purpose of this study, customer services that exist in the public organizations, such as tax offices, hospitals and other health care organizations, or other social services organizations, are not going to be in the focus. It is rather organizations of the commercial character and their customer services that are going to be given a closer look into.

According to Andreassen, (2000) service quality is the key to customer satisfaction, and for the companies which, as a part of their business have a telephone based customer service, quality and success heavily rely on the communication processes inside that service. The first contact a customer has with an organization is usually through their customer service, and Zeithaml (1988) notes that the communicative quality occurs during service delivery, usually in an interaction between the customer and contact personnel of the service firm, and this is why service quality is highly dependent on the performance of the service personnel, in terms of their interpersonal communication skills.

Proper communication training of the customer service personnel might influence the future behaviors of the customer towards the organization, since the customers' impression of the organization might depend on their first contact with the customer service personnel. Swedish companies, keeping pace with the technological era, more and more introduce automated customer services, but there is still a great number of both customers and organizations who prefer having human employees in their

customer service. The reason behind this might be that, even though an automated service might be more efficient, leading a conversation with a machine doesn't provide the customer with a service personalized, unique, emphatic, and tailored to their specific need.

Having this in mind, customer service employees' communicative capabilities are often neglected, and it is not unusual that customers end up speaking with an employee who lacks training in the necessary interpersonal communication skills. According to DeKay (2012:449) interpersonal communication skills are critical attributes in the workplace. These skills are of crucial importance to a successful service, and a determiner of the client's future dealings with a company, especially in the case where there has to be oral compensation for the lack of visual communicative signals, as is the case with the telephone communication where valuable nonverbal communicative cues are restricted, as opposed to face to face communication.

The interest for this issue, and writing this study, arose from the fact that the research on this question still doesn't exist in volumes that would loudly and clearly state exactly which communicative styles are considered positive and lead to customer satisfaction, and which styles or combination of styles is to be integrated into service personnel training. This mainly depends on the fact that the context and the nature of the companies and their target customer base greatly vary. Another issue that occurs in the research of this kind is that, often times, the customer's and the organization's perspectives on the service and product don't coincide, and companies sometimes forget that it is according to the customers needs that the service has to be tailored. This results in neglecting the customer's perspective. However, some general communicative styles guidelines that result in customer satisfaction or dissatisfaction are still possible to discover.

The key aspects to consider here are different styles of communication, and Norton (1979) defined styles of communication as "the way one verbally and paraverbally interacts to signal how message content should be taken, interpreted, filtered, or understood". An organization might consider these styles satisfactory/dissatisfactory

but the customers might interpret differently, and possibly judge their whole experience with a company as negative or positive based on those styles, and their initial contact and experience with the customer service. This study gives insight into the customer's perspective on those styles.

## 1.2 Purpose and Research Question

Considering that many companies in Sweden today have a telephone based customer service, the purpose of this research is to gain a deeper understanding of the communicative styles that 1) make the telephone based customer service communication satisfactory, and 2) make the telephone based customer service communication unsatisfactory. Furthermore, this study will research and deal with possible cultural differences between the participants born in Sweden and born elsewhere, in terms of different tendencies related to the attitudes, values, preferences and practices.

In order to reach a deeper understanding behind a customer's perspective and perception of different communication styles, together with the willingness or unwillingness to deal with a certain company in future, one research question that is addressed here is:

(1) Which communicative styles lead to customer satisfaction in a telephone based customer service communication?



## 2. Theoretical Framework

### 2.1 Key Concepts

#### 2.1.1 Audio Only Communication

This study deals with mediated communication, that is telephone communication that is restricted to audio communication only. This kind of communication is not rich in communicative clues and signals as the face-to-face communication is, and therefore some of the interactive values could be lost. Kira et al (2009) emphasized that audio-only interactions are more task-oriented, depersonalized, less spontaneous, and therefore might end in a different outcome. Audio-only interaction has fewer interactional cues, such as body language or the activity of the other collaborator that send the visual communicative signals to the interlocutors. However, Ochsman and Chapanis' (1974) study that deals with comparisons of different communicational modes, including face-to-face and telephone communication, concluded that telephone communication does not necessarily lead to a less satisfactory outcome of communication. The participants in this study actually spent more unnecessary time in face-to-face communication, while task solving, because this type of communication provides for more communicational clues that each participant has to process, and focus on, while telephone communication gives them the opportunity to focus on fewer cues, thus providing them with more time for problem solving. Furthermore, while expressing the satisfaction over using the two different methods of communication, face-to-face and telephone, there was not a big difference, participants actually preferred the telephone for the conditions that included levels of frustration, task complication and task completion (Ochsman and Chapanis', 1974).

Even though audio only communication is impoverished, and has fewer interactional clues, there is not enough evidence to support that face-to-face communication is more preferred or more beneficial to the organizations that have telephone based customer services.

## 2.1.2 Interpersonal Communication in Workplace

Even though, as crucial as it is to any relationship, the new wave of interest for the interpersonal communication in workplace started in the 1970s together with the interest in nonverbal communication, conflict, gender, and intercultural communication (Baxter and Braithwaite, 2008). The reason why it emerged as a field of interest comes from the fact that the relationship building depends on the interpersonal communication, and the quality of relationship depends on the quality of communication.

The modern era, technological advance and globalization have all influenced the way organizations today function, and the interpersonal communication in those organizations changed as a result. Organization's leaders and management have become more aware of the identity image they create through communication, and the unified image and identity have to be maintained and exercised on every level of the organizational structure, including customer service. As Miller (2012:265) notes, in today's world even a simple trip to the grocery store includes at least one service encounter which affects both the organization's profit and our mood. Even though there have been so many studies on the topic, customers still express dissatisfaction with the customer services around the world, and one of the reasons might be that some organizations cut back on investing in the quality of communication in those services thinking that it is unnecessary. The issue becomes even bigger in the case of service interpersonal communication processes taking place via telephones, because there is no face-to-face interaction which provides for valuable interaction repairs, but one thing is for sure, according to Miller (2012:268) communication in service encounters can influence a wide variety of customer attitudes, satisfaction as well as organizational profits.

According to DeKay (2012) interpersonal communication skills are crucial to the workplace, even though in some companies managing professionals still divide interpersonal skills and communication into two separate sets of behaviors. The

opposite has been the case, and many studies prove that no successful interpersonal skills can exist without communication. Furthermore, not only do these two behaviors belong together, but research shows that employees who are expressing both of these behaviors are most likely the ones to get promotions and recognitions in their workplace. In addition to this, successful employees trained in interpersonal communication are actually moneymakers to the companies, so trainings in interpersonal communication skills contribute to positive outcomes of both the companies and employees (DeKay, 2012:451).

### **2.1.3 Positive and Negative Communication Styles**

Referring to Norton's (1979) definition of styles of communication, several styles that can co-exist or be on opposite sides. Some of the positive styles include the attentive, relaxed, and friendly styles that include acknowledging, encouraging, deliberately reacting to, and accommodating others, and some of the negative styles include the contentious, dramatic, dominant that include talking frequently, coming on strongly, and taking control in social situations. Different communication styles, in this sense, include those that customers perceive as positive or negative, and a customer service personnel communication style can belong to either dimension of the spectrum, or be in a combination of the two.

Webster & Sundaram (2009) mention that there are so called warm and cold communication styles, where affiliate styles are defined as warm, and dominating as cold styles. Warm styles include friendliness, empathy, warmth, compassion, humor, and dominance communication styles include conciseness, hurriedness, use of technical jargon, direction giving and so on. These styles influence judgements of the customers about the quality of service, and warm communication styles are directly linked to favorable evaluations, whereas cold ones to unfavorable evaluations. A special emphasis here is on the styles that lead to customer satisfaction, and a positive link was found between warm styles and customer satisfaction. A customer is more likely to evaluate

their experience with customer service as satisfying if the customer service employee listens and answers questions, empathizes, and expresses warmth and friendliness in communication.

According to Barnett and Johnson, (2016:201) communication styles may be defined as the way a person sends verbal, paraverbal, and nonverbal signals during social interactions, and these signals show who a person is, what they want or appear to be, how they relate to the people with whom they interact, and in what way their message should be interpreted. Furthermore, communication styles may be defined as consisting of six domains: expressiveness (the verbal manifestation of the communication), preciseness (the way individuals structure their communication), verbal aggressiveness, questioningness (being philosophical, inquisitive, argumentative, or unconventional), emotionality (communication behaviors that exhibit being piqued, stressed, sentimental, sad, defensive, and bad-tempered), and impression manipulativeness (communication behaviors which may be used in order to obtain status or other rewards, or to stir other's communication or behavior) (Barnett and Johnson, 2016:201).

#### **2.1.4 Communication Orientation**

Communication orientation relates to the customer's interactive preferences when it comes to interaction with service personnel, and this orientation can be interaction orientation or task orientation. Homburg et al (2010) describe interaction orientation as a customer's tendency to socialize with a salesperson in sales conversations, and task orientation refers to a customer's tendency to focus on the buying/selling task and to be highly goal-oriented. This orientation depends on the context, like the company's nature or target customers that interact with the organization. In order to gain a loyal customer base and to reach the customer satisfaction, the customer service personnel needs to orientate their communication so that it fits the customer needs and the customer's orientation, in accordance to the

context. Of vital importance here is the service personnel's ability to adapt to the customer's wishes and the ability to recognize the customer's communicative orientation in the first place, so they can adapt their communicative style accordingly as well.

In communication with a customer, the manner in which a decision is communicated to customers is important for the successful communication of service personnel because it influences and has a direct relation to levels of customer satisfaction. Sparks (1997) writes about two communicative styles related to the communication orientation, and those are accommodative and underaccommodative styles, and those styles that include attempts to accommodate communicative behavior to the needs of the customer are of vital importance to the company, and to customer satisfaction. Customer service providers can use many strategies to signal their helpfulness, understanding, and liking of the customer. In the accommodative style, customer service providers might demonstrate understanding of empathy for the customer's position, explain information using appropriate customer friendly language, and use forms of address to personalize the interaction, or attempt to minimize the social distance between themselves and their customers.

In contrast to this, an underaccommodating style includes not changing the nature and way of communicating either vocally, verbally, or nonverbally to show understanding or interest in the customer's concerns. This style is polite, but impersonal. However, depending on the organization's nature and the customer's need, this style can be the customer's preferred style of communication. Training and the ability to detect the customer's wishes and the preferred style may help the customer service personnel to decide upon which one of these styles would be appropriate to employ according to the customer's needs.

### 2.1.5 Communicative Quality

In order to lead to customer satisfaction, it is not enough for customer service communication only to employ the necessary communication style. In addition to the style, customer service personnel need to be trained in how they deliver their message, and Abu-ELSamen et al (2011) emphasized that businesses often fail to address important issues that customer service deals with, including verbal communication, strategic aspects of communication, and well-trained customer service staff. They defined customer service skills as individual employees' behavioral competencies that are essential to deliver a high quality of customer service, and individual customer service employees as those employees who interact directly with the organization's customers, either face to face, over the phone, or over the call center, therefore representing the whole company.

Parasuraman (1985), deals with the beginnings of the concerns and interest for the customer service, and the quality of service personnel. In many dimensions this quality interconnects with communication. Important dimensions for a good quality service include responsiveness, a dimension that concerns the promptness and timeliness of service; competence that involves knowledge and skill of the contact personnel; access that involves approachability and ease of contact, and courtesy that involves politeness, respect, consideration, and friendliness. In this sense, communication means keeping customers informed in language they can understand, listening to customers, explaining, assuring the consumer that a problem will be handled, all this in addition to the communication styles.

In order to reach such sophisticated communication in a customer service, there has to be personnel training provided, and Sahai (2014) talks about the training in interpersonal communicative skills for the employees of the customer service, underlying that the lack of training will result in poor interpersonal skills, and emphasizing that the customers will interpret and eventually remember this as poor service the next time they interact with the organization, or when talking about the

experience they have had with others. The indications for this come from the theory of Functional Fluency, a theory that deals with a model of behavior diagnosis, and understanding the way we respond to situations, in order to improve those responses into socially acceptable ones. There are several elements of this theory model that include; dominating, marshmallowing, structuring, nurturing, accounting, cooperative, spontaneous, compliant/resistant, and immature modes of communication. Each of these modes includes specific behaviors which can be experienced by customers as positive or negative. They include bossy, blaming, friendly, empathetic, understanding, selfish, encouraging, and other variables, and through proper training the customer service personnel can deliver the decision and communicate it in the mode that suits the customer and the context.

Employment of the mentioned factors and implementation of the personnel training are important for companies because good communication affects trust, satisfaction, and loyalty between customers and customer service personnel (Coelho and Machas 2004). Furthermore, higher satisfaction equals higher loyalty which is crucial for a returning customer, and “good” communication in customer service here is defined as helpful, positive, timely, useful, easy, and pleasant to the customer, and is delivered in such a way that the customer uses a minimum effort to process and understand the necessary information. This means that, in addition to all the communicative expertise behind successful customer service, in order for customer service communication to result in customer satisfaction, the information presented must be adapted to the customer’s level of knowledge, which is where the adequate training contributes.

In case some of the communicative factors fail in the process of communication between a customer and customer service personnel, there are always backup systems of so called recovery. Smith, Bolton and Wagner (1999) deal with failure and recovery, where communicative styles of service personnel determine customer’s behavior, where, if a service failure happens, recovery attributes, such as an apology or recovery initiation communicate respect and empathy to the customer prompting the customer to deem the interaction positive. This way, the customer service personnel still has a chance to

continue with the communication that will, in the end, be experienced as positive by the customer.

### 2.1.6 Summary of the Concepts and Theories

<p>Audio only communication</p>	<p>-Audio-only interaction has fewer interactional cues, such as body language or the activity of the other collaborator that send the visual communicative signals to the interlocutors</p> <p>-However, telephone communication does not necessarily lead to a less satisfactory outcome of communication..</p> <p>Even though audio only communication is impoverished, there is no enough evidence to support that face-to-face communication is more preferred or more beneficial to the organizations that have telephone based customer services.</p>
<p>Interpersonal Communication in Workplace</p>	<p>-Relationship building depends on the interpersonal communication.</p> <p>-The quality of relationship depends on the quality of communication.</p> <p>-Communication in service encounters can influence a wide variety of customer attitudes, satisfaction as well as organizational profits.</p> <p>-No successful interpersonal skills can exist without communication.</p> <p>-Employees trained in these skills are the ones to get promotions and recognition, and are profit makers.</p>



Communication Orientation	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>-Customer’s socialisation orientation and task orientation.</li> <li>-The service personnel’s ability to adapt to the customer’s communication orientation.</li> <li>-Two types of communication orientation: the accommodating style, and the underaccommodating style.</li> </ul>
Communicative Quality	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>-“How” something is communicated.</li> <li>-Behavioral competencies that are essential to deliver a high quality of customer service.</li> <li>-The theory of Functional Fluency, a theory that deals with a model of behavior diagnosis.</li> <li>-Fails in the process of communication between a customer and customer service personnel, can be fixed with backup systems of so called recovery.</li> </ul>

**2.2 Previous Research**

Zabava Ford’s (2003) study deals with the personalized service communication performance, and its influence on predicting customer satisfaction and loyalty. The study takes a point from the importance of the personalized service, in today’s modern times, where more and more companies implement the depersonalized service, in order to save time, while neglecting the customer’s needs. There are three types of services: personalized customer service which is related to relationship building, which in turn leads to customer satisfaction and eventually to a loyal customer; courteous service which refers to common communication routine in encounters with supermarket employees, convenience store, or bank employees, and manipulative service which is strategic service intended to deceive or control customers, and includes controlling and

management of emotions, in order to sell the product, or steer the customer's opinions. Personalized service communication is the most complex and time-consuming one, and therefore tailored to the unique needs of individual customers. Communication in personalized service includes a customer orientation, in which service personnel connects with a customer by asking questions, giving advice in order to identify identify a customer's specific needs and tailor service to meet those needs. This kind of communication happens through verbal and nonverbal communication of the personnel that shows they are fully engaged in an interaction with a customer, by using language that they can easily understand, or by expressing sensitivity to a customer's feelings or needs.

Two models were engaged in the study; Model 1 proposes that both communicative expectations and performance will predict satisfaction, whereas Model 2 proposes that only communicative performance will predict satisfaction. Participants were 253 adults in a midwestern state of the United States, and included 154 females and 99 males, aged from 18 to 76, who completed a two-page survey focused on one of four categories of service providers: physicians, dentists, auto mechanics, or hairdressers. Results for Model 1 showed that communicative expectations were a relatively weak predictor of customer satisfaction, however, Model 2 revealed that perceptions of communicative performance as the predictor of customer satisfaction were strong, and the customer loyalty was strongly predicted by customer satisfaction for all four types of service providers. Analysis showed that participants gender was not a significant predictor of communication expectations, performance, satisfaction, or loyalty to neither of the professions except the hairdressers. Female customers tended to report higher expectations for personalized service communication from their hairdressers. Customer age, like customer gender, was only influential, and older customers tended to have higher expectations for personalized service communication from their hairdressers. In turn, they reported more personalized service communication performance and higher satisfaction and loyalty.

Abu-ELSamen et al (2011) did a study in which they examined the relationship between

customer service skills and customer's satisfaction and loyalty. The goals of the study were to reveal the customer service skills that should be possessed by employees in order to provide satisfactory customer service from customers' perspectives, and to investigate if there are relationships between customer service skills and customer satisfaction. The research model included several perspectives that influence the customer satisfaction, such as reputation building skills, problem solving skills, verbal communications skills, non verbal communications skills, and culture skills. When it comes to reputation, employees with their attitudes and behaviors can affect a company's image in customers' minds. Problem solving skills refers to employees' ability to identify and find the solutions for the customers' problems. As the literature suggests, communication is an essential part of successful customer service, and verbal communication skills involve employees who are customer-oriented, have good listening skills, who are being responsive and friendly with customers. Nonverbal communication skills include employees' ability to understand body language, that is, everything beyond the verbal communication. Customer service culture skills refers to the organization's orientation to the customer needs, and putting the customer in the center of the company's attention.

The study was focused on the mobile service subscribers of different operators in Jordan who experienced problems with their operators. The data was collected through questionnaires, and the the sample data was 1,007. The results proved that customer service skills have significant relationships with customers' satisfaction. It has been found that the reputation-building dimension, non verbal communication, and customer service culture had a positive effect on customer satisfaction. The relationships between the problem-solving skills, verbal communication skills were found negative, which was explained through the study set-up where participants had problems with their operators and thus experienced a service failure that was not successfully recovered. This is known as the "service recovery paradox" where customer satisfaction tends to be higher when a service failure occurs and is successfully recovered than those cases where there is no failure at all. The results also suggested a

positive relationship between customers' service skills and customers' loyalty which is mediated by customers satisfaction. Customers that are satisfied with a company are likely to remain loyal to that same company.

## 3. Methodology

### 3.1 The Research Design

The focus of this study has been on the customers and how they perceive and narrate their experiences related to the topic of the study. Considering the topic of this study, a decision has been made to make an online survey as the main method of data collection, since this is a method fit for obtaining statistical data, and which also provides the more narrative part in which all the study participants had a chance to describe and retell their experiences with a telephone based customer service. This means that the method for the data analysis will be mixed, meaning both quantitative and qualitative.

The first part of the data collection method consists of the general demographic data, and closed questions, which enabled for obtaining the statistical parameters for comparison. This data will be analysed quantitatively. Quantitative method of data gathering and analysis means collecting material that is countable or measurable, and will be shown as numerics and percentages later in the data analysis. The purposes of quantitative analysis counting, coding and keywords, is to get the variables for comparison and numeric overview first. This kind of data is made sense of by using statistical analysing, and later comparing the variables to get the numeric overview (Franklin, 2012:167).

The second part consists of open questions, which provided a unique insight about the topic, based on what each and every study participant wrote as their particular experience. This way, even if the participants didn't have the opportunity to entirely express their points of view in the beginning, they could have done so in the second part,

which allowed for freedom of thought and experience sharing. This kind of data is used for qualitative data analysis, and encompasses the material that does not need to be counted, so thematic coding and analysis was used here, the content of the gathered data has been analysed. Different phrases and words are analysed in clusters, and the point of analysis are keywords which appear most often in relation to the specific question (Franklin 2012:217). Keywords for the analysis were not set prior to the analysis, but they have been analysed by the order of appearance in the data.

Because of the nature of this study, this kind of design and analysis are deemed necessary and the most efficient ones, since the customer's experience is in the focus, and personal input in form of narratives provided for the valuable data for the analysis section. This study has not focused on any specific company, but has a purpose of presenting a general feeling of the participants who took a part in this study, who themselves have experience with being customers, and who live in Sweden, towards the communicative perspectives of the services they receive.

### **3.2 The Survey Questions Formulation**

The survey questions were intended to connect to the theory and to the research question of which communicative styles lead to customer satisfaction in a telephone based customer service communication.

In the words of Ben-Sira (1976:5), when a customer calls for the customer service, it is most often that they have some sort of issue that needs to be sorted out, and before the customer service person provides them with the possible solutions, there will be the initial communication where the customer explains the issue and somehow 'vents out' the anxiety followed by the issue. Now, the customer service's communicative response to this 'venting out' is crucial prior to delivering the possible solutions, because it can calm the customer down, and in cases where the immediate solution to the problem is yet to be delivered, the way the response is given will affect the client's immediate satisfaction, because of the mode of the professional's response rather than of its

content. This is what makes the telephone based customer service unique and still existing, in comparison to the automated services that appear more and more today - the human way of communicating the information, the 'how' of it that a machine cannot provide. The "how" of the communication was discussed in the part of the communicative quality, which came as the motivation for questions: "Customer service person is someone who represents the face of the company", and "Customer service person making a joke during the conversation is something I consider".

Communication orientation includes the service personnels' active listening and feedback providing. Why feedback giving is important could be explained through the concept of 'attentiveness'. Attentiveness, according to Norton and Pettegrew (1979:14), is related to empathy and listening, and it means that somebody is paying attention to what is being said beyond than just passive listening. It involves 'active' listening by behaving in such a way that it signals that one is directing all attention and energy into the communicative process. By showing this kind of behavior, and sending these signals, the communicator is implying that the other person is respected and worth listening to. The signals that show attentiveness include verbal or nonverbal feedback, and since in this case the nonverbal cues are omitted, the verbal feedback serves as the signal of attentiveness. The questions: "Customer service person giving feedback ("mmmh", "yes" "I see") at the same as I am speaking is in my opinion a ", and "If a customer service person calls me by my name, I would consider that", relate to the communication orientation.

Communicative styles are divided into warm and cold styles, and questions about those styles in the Section 4 of the survey ( see Attachment 2) showed that customers put friendliness on the first place. Friendliness is one of the warm communicative styles. Webster and Sundaram note (2009:111) that when customers are in relatively complex service situations, they may be drawn to a provider communicating in a friendly, affiliative way, because of an ensuing reduction in anxiety and tension. The customer's anxiety and tension may be reduced by a friendly way of communicating of a customer service employee, involving empathy, since empathy usually qualifies as a friendly

quality. This way of communicating with the customer is reassuring, in those usually stressful moments for the customers.

When thinking about the customer service and why customers turn to it, the first thing that usually comes to mind is the necessity of finding a solution to some kind of issue, because of which one calls to a customer service support. Hand in hand with having an issue or concern, the customer is usually anxious about finding the solution, and it is not rarely that a solution needs to be delivered in a short time. All of these factors influence the communication and the general outcome of the interaction, where the implementing the proper style of communication might influence that outcome for the best. A simple way of representing this is making a presupposition that a customer's issue, anxiety and lack of time is a negative variable, and a customer service's employee's communication needs to represent a positive variable in order to neutralise the customer's negative one. Only this kind of setting will result in a positive outcome.

Interpersonal communication in workplace delves on the relationships, and successful relationships between the customer and the customer service personnel depend on the trust. In order to establish a trustworthy long-term relationship that leads to loyalty, an environment that nurtures the development of such relationship has to be created (Homburg, Müller and Klarmann, 2010). Therefore the relational customer orientation delves on establishing the trusting relationship with the customer first, a relationship that will make the customer feel valued and respected, and not the pure consumer of the goods. Once established, this kind of relationship might pave the road to a loyal customer.

Trust, loyalty and satisfaction are mutually interdependent values, and the one is not possible without the other two. The satisfied customer will trust the company and thus become a loyal customer, and gaining the customer's trust which eventually leads to loyalty results not only in customer satisfaction, but also organization profits, since retaining existing customers costs less money than gaining new ones, according to Komunda and Osarenkhoe (2012:87), because of the stories of that customers share with other people. If those stories are negative, the organization will not only lose that

customer, but at least five other, potential customers. The questions: “The customer service person will gain my trust if”, and “The customer service person will gain my distrust if”, are related to this theory.

### **3.3 Method for Data Collection and Participants**

The primary method of data collection was an online survey conducted for approximately one month from the beginning of March to the beginning of April 2017. The survey was made up of four sections (see Attachment 2). The first section included general, demographic questions of gender, age and an eliminatory question that deemed participants that were taking the survey as qualified to take it; in case they responded positively to the question on whether they have had experience with contacting a telephone based customer service in Sweden. The second section of the survey consisted of closed/multiple choice questions where participants were asked to choose one of the options, and which later on provided an idea of how the participants feel about the employees of a telephone based customer service in terms of what they like or dislike, appreciate or think unprofessional. The third section included a grading question with seven positive and seven negative characteristics of communicative behavior of telephone based customer service personnel, where the participants were asked to grade the most positive and the most negative ones. And the last section of the survey contained open questions where participants were able to express their opinions freely, and retell experiences they thought important. This part was the most important one for the study and analysis.

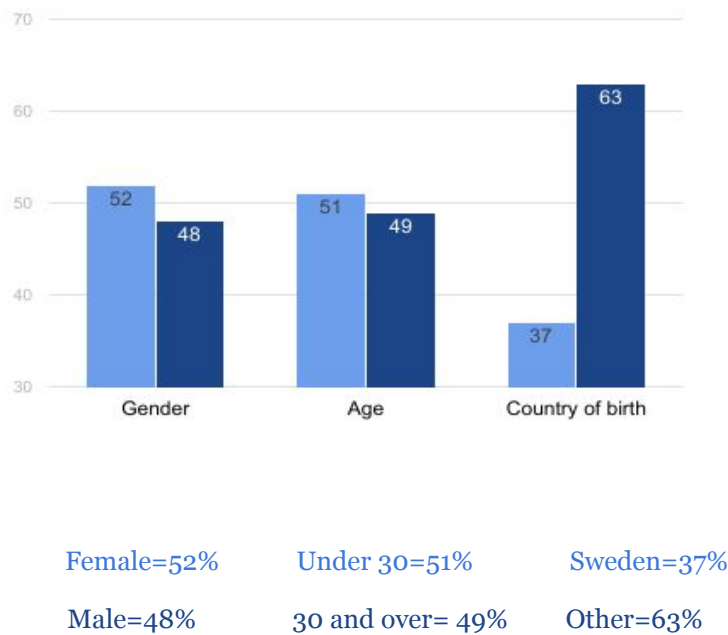
Since the primary goal of the study was to gather data about telephone based customer service in Sweden, participants who live in Sweden were prioritized, even though the survey was open to everyone. During the final analysis, those participants that took part in the study but don't live in Sweden were eliminated from the total count. In the end, the answers of a total number of one hundred participants were used in this study. Demographic data about the country of birth of the participants was also gathered, as



well as their age and gender, since these are the factors that could impact the perceptions and the relevant experiences of the participants.

Figure 1. shows how the qualified participants' demographic data looks like, and which parameters determined if participants qualified to take part in the study.

**Figure 1.**



Having participants from the gender and age groups in almost equal percentages allowed for the most optimal representation of the results when it comes to these two clusters and the variables. Country of birth statistical data allows for the possible cultural differences between the participants born in Sweden and born elsewhere, in terms of different tendencies related to the attitudes, values, preferences and practices. The data from Figure 1 will be used for the further reference in the results sections below which deals with both quantitative and qualitative analysis.

The survey was created in Google forms, and shared on the author's private Facebook profile, different professional and private Facebook groups, and work e-mail. This way a

considerable number of participants with different backgrounds who moved to live in Sweden, as well as those born and raised in Sweden, were gathered. Apart from the necessary requirements of living in Sweden and having experience with contacting a telephone based customer service, no other factors decided upon eligibility of the participants for taking the survey, or participating in the study.

### **3.3.1 Ethical Considerations**

The first page of the study's online survey provided the general information about the data collection, author's credentials, and a disclaimer which stated that the survey will not disclose any personal information (see Attachment 1). Participants' names, or any other personal information aside from those included in the questions, like gender and age, are not known to the author. By taking the survey, participants agreed to be a part of this study, and let their demographic and other collected data to be used for the study's purposes.

### **3.4 Data Analysis and Coding Process**

The goal of this study is to discover which kinds of communicative styles in a telephone based customer service lead to customer satisfaction. The number of responses collected by the time of conducting the survey was 117 total answers, but since there were two elimination questions: "Which country do you live in?" and "Do you have experience with contacting a telephone based customer service?" (see Attachment 2), the total number of valid answers added up to one hundred.

The quantitative analysis started by transferring all the answers into an Excel sheet, and first focusing on the statistical part of the data. The relevant variables for the analysis of the first part of the survey included gender, age, and country of birth. The idea was to get the statistical data out of a total number of valid responses, and see if there is a difference, and to which extent, when it comes to different genders, ages, and between

participants who were born in Sweden, and those who were born elsewhere, but are living in Sweden now. The categories were straightforward, and determined prior to the coding start. Categories included gender expressed as male/female, and coded as M/F; age coded as under 30 years of age/30 or over years of age, coded as U30/30O30; and born in Sweden/born somewhere else, coded as SW/OT (other).

The second part of the survey included four closed questions and two sets of possible answers which included “agree/disagree” coded as A/D, “yes/no” coded as Y/N, “patronizing/friendly” coded as P/F, “friendly/unprofessional” coded as F/U, “rude/professional” coded as R/P, and “good listener/bad listener”, coded as GL/BL. The codings from the first part of the survey, including gender, age and country of birth were added to these categories, in order to see if there is a difference and to which extent when it comes to different gender, ages, and country of birth giving “yes/no” or “agree/disagree” answers.

The third part of the survey included open questions for which there was no statistical analysis, hence allowing for the qualitative analysis. However, there was thematic coding and thematic analysis applied. Thematic coding allows for certain themes to arise during the analysis of the data, and as such to be organized into certain segments, and thematic analysis is a method for identifying, analysing and reporting themes that appear within data (Braun and Clarke, 2006:79). Since the participants’ answers included stories of different experiences, they were analysed as such- individually and by interpreting the different themes appearing in them.

The fourth part of the survey included two questions concerning seven positive and seven negative communicative styles, and again, no specific coding was used in this case. This question was analysed as an overview of an exact percentage number of one hundred participants in their choosing of the communicative styles that make them satisfied or unsatisfied in their communication with a telephone based customer service personnel.

By overviewing the total amount of answers, and the validity, a decision has been made that even though all of the one hundred answers were analysed percentually, not all of

the one hundred answers are going to be analysed thematically as well, since some of the descriptive answers for the thematic analysis included short, irrelevant or non-elaborated answers, so only the descriptive ones have been used to get the more personalised overview of the analysis, as compared to the statistical part. The number of the most similar answers in one question decided upon a theme, so only those answers that were the most frequent and relevant ones were put into topic clusters and were analysed accordingly. The decision to do so was made because it would be impossible to analyse every answer outside the derived topic, and because the similar answers indicate a tendency. The answers that were excluded from the thematic analysis can be found in Attachment 3.

Analysing the data, and answers given to different questions, a decision has been made that some of the questions from the third section that include the open questions are not suitable for the analysis, since they might have influenced the participants to provide the repetitive answers and data. Based on this presupposition these questions were deemed not valid and irrelevant. The answers that were not analysed can be found in Attachment 3.

### **3.5 Limitations and Delimitations**

One of the limitations in this study is the participant's emotional bias towards certain companies upon which they base their whole experience of dealing with telephone based customer service personnel. Even though a fair number of participants have been a part of this study, no generalizations should be made, but this study should rather serve as a guideline for future studies into the topic.

Furthermore, even though the customer's perspective is highly valuable, because of the time limitations, there has not been a chance to include the organization's perspective into the study which would provide for an insightful overview into the possible difference in attitudes, values and perspectives of the both sides

Even though cultural background has been taken into account by allowing the

participants to write the country of birth, no cultural clusters were analysed. The study analysis rather compares the attitudes of those participants who have moved to Sweden, to those born in Sweden. This has been decided by the author for the sake of data analysis, and keeping the topic narrow. A further study can be made allowing for a more detailed cluster analysis.

## 4. Results and Discussion

This chapter is divided into two parts. The first part deals with the statistical part of the results, that is the quantitative results, giving insight into how the opinions differ, if they differ, and to which extent, when it comes to various communication styles of telephone based customer service personnel. It shows how much the participants agree/disagree to certain statements, and which communicative styles of the customer service personnel make them feel satisfied/dissatisfied in this communication.

The second part deals with the experiences that the participants shared having the liberty to do so in as much detail as they wanted. These experiences were clustered according to the themes that emerged during the data analysis, so the qualitative results will be represented thematically. This granted for the more personal point of view when it comes to the communication with the customer service personnel.

The whole section is intertwined with the representations of the collected data, data interpretation, and the related theoretical implications. The theoretical and authors' implications are put into separate sections of the text, where the theoretical implications usually contain quotes and other authors' references. This way enabled for a more unified insight into the results and their theoretical stand.

## 4.1 Communicative Style Preferences

One of the questions around which discussion often revolves, is whether investing into good quality customer service is necessary, since many companies today cut back on those services in order to save money. However, a customer service, or in this case, a telephone based customer service employee is the first person customers usually get into contact with, and the very important first impression matters for building of future relationship through communication.

*“Customer service providers have a unique role as organizational representatives.”*

Zabava Ford (1999:342)

The customer service personnel often represents the image of the whole organization in the minds of customers. That first, usually shorter, contact with the customer service leaves a deep impression on the customer regarding the values of the organization. This impression then very often determines and influences the customer satisfaction, which in turn influences the sales and success of the company (Zabava Ford, 1999).

The question whether a customer service person is someone who represents the face of the company got the following results presented in Table 1.

**Table 1.**

Customer service person is someone who represents the face of the company:

	Female	Male	Under 30	30 or over	Born in: Sweden	Born in: Other
Agree	47%	42%	46%	43%	32%	57%
Disagree	5%	6%	5%	6%	5%	6%

As it is shown in Table 1, there is an almost unified participants' answer to this question. In total, 89% of participants agree that the service person is someone who represents

the face of the company, and there is no big procentual distinction between gender, age or the place of birth, considering the total number of participants.

#### 4.1.2 Level of Professionalism

For the customer service communication to be successful, it is not only important what is being communicated. Of course, the ‘what’ is vital, like providing the right and necessary information, but it is the manner, the ‘how’ the information is communicated that is also important, since this is the factor that can be the deciding one in achieving the customer satisfaction, that is, if the customer feels understood, appreciated or respected apart from being provided with pure information, just for the sake of information sharing.

*“In service encounters, where interactions between employees and the customer often become part of the service itself in the customer’s mind, not only the service outcome but also the manner in which the service is delivered is important to the customer.”*

(Mohr, Bitner, 1991)

The following overview shows what participants decided were the most preferable styles while communicating with telephone based customer service personnel.

**Table 2.**

Customer service person making a joke during the conversation is something I consider:

	Female	Male	Under 30	30 or over	Born in: Sweden	Born in: Other
Friendly	32%	37%	37%	32%	23%	46%
Unprofessional	20%	11%	14%	17%	14%	17%

Making a joke during a conversation with a customer, in customer service, can determine the future behavior of that customer. As seen from Table 2, 69% of the total number of the participants think that it is acceptable if a customer service person makes a joke during a conversation. Only 31% participants think it is unprofessional, and the Table shows a bit higher tendency for the females who took part in this study to think that making jokes is unprofessional. The rest of the categories are quite unified in their answers.

How customers determine joking and the general use of humor (in) appropriately is directly related to the type of the organization. For example, if an organization is less serious such as a bar, then the use of jokes and humor will be deemed appropriate. In contrast, customers contacting more serious organizations, like banks, or health care, will deem the use of humor and jokes inappropriate. More favorable reactions, which might lead to customer satisfaction in the end, may rise when humor and jokes are used in settings perceived as appropriate (Mayer, Roehm and Brady, 2013).

Furthermore, literature dealing with similar subject offers the explanation that if jokes are used, it is important for them to be related to the context, conversation and setting. Van Dolen, De Ruyter, and Streukens (2004) explain that the unfavorable outcomes show that there is a connection between the use of humor as the compensation of the service failure, and the use of jokes which have no connection to the context are considered unprofessional and unnecessary. The favorable outcomes relate to the competent and smart use of jokes as an enrichment to the conversation, where the use of humor can help in creating the bond between the customer and the customer service personnel, and where the jokes actually relate to the issue, but do not in an compensating for the lack of knowledge/competence.



### 4.1.3 Feedback

The telephone mediated communication requires the use of feedback more than a face-to-face communication does, since there are no other clues, such as body language, present, and the conversation participants have to rely on the auditory signals only. The participants of a telephone mediated conversation have to compensate for the other signals, and one of the way of compensating is the extensive use of feedback. However, there is a difference in the types of feedback that is used in these circumstances as compared to face-to-face conversation.

According to Ahlsén, Allwood & Nivre (2003:5) the feedback share is about the same in telephone and face-to-face interaction, however the use of utterances with initial feedback is more typical in the telephone interactions and in interactions between strangers. Thus, the telephone conversations include more frequent use of this kind of feedback utterances, and less usage of interrupting feedback which might be due to the fact that the conversation participants don't know each other, and because of an institutionalised setting.

Both of these presuppositions - the participants who don't know each other, and the professional nature of the conversation, are present in the communication between the customer and the telephone based customer service employee.

*"'Good listening' behavior entails at least the following four components: (1) thinking ahead of the speaker, (2) weighing verbal evidence carefully, (3) reviewing the completed portion of the discourse, (4) listening between the lines for implicit meanings."*

Nichols (1957:82)

Even though feedback sometimes can be categorised as an automatic behavior, something that we do without giving it much thought, this study focuses on the giving of the excessive feedback, and how the study participants feel about it. Because of already mentioned differences of feedback types in face-to-face, and audio only interactions,

excessive giving of feedback sometimes needs to be employed, that is, it has to become a purposeful behavior, as opposed to the automatic behavior, in order to make up for the lack of visual signals. Excessive feedback can be sometimes considered an intrusive behavior, while one is speaking, but Table 3. shows how important the study participants think the feedback is:

**Table 3.**

Customer service person giving feedback (“mmmh”, “yes” “I see”) at the same as I am speaking is in my opinion a:

	Female	Male	Under 30	30 or over	Born in: Sweden	Born in: Other
Good listener	45%	37%	40%	42%	28%	54%
Bad listener	7%	11%	11%	7%	9%	9%

A total of 82% of participants agreed that giving feedback is a quality of a good listener, implying that a bad listener is a person who doesn't give them the feedback while they are talking, thinking that person is not paying attention to what they are saying. As shown in Table 3, participants don't consider getting feedback an intrusive communicative behavior, and this could be explained in words of Allwood and Ahlsén (1999:1356) where the feedback represents the willingness of the other person to continue, perceive, understand and react to the communicated message, as well as implicitly signalling that the person has heard, understood, and/or partly agreed to what has been said.

Another important characteristic of providing the feedback to the participants, is related to the role clarification (Walderssee and Luthans, 1994). What this implies is that the customers through feedback eliciting and feedback initiation behaviors assign roles, both to themselves - a role of somebody needing assistance, knowledge or help, and by getting the feedback from the customer service employee they assign the employee the

role of the competent, knowledgeable individual who is there to provide the assistance needed. That is why, if proper feedback doesn't occur, the customers might think that the customer service employee is not capable of solving their issue, i.e. they are not fulfilling their role, which might lead to customer dissatisfaction.

#### 4.1.4 Trust and Loyalty

Two questions in the survey (“The customer service person will gain my trust if:”, and “The customer service person will gain my distrust if:”) are directed towards the communicative styles of the telephone based customer service personnel that are trust related. These questions were open, meaning that the participants got the chance to describe their trust related experiences in their own words.

The summary of the narratives, out of the total number of one hundred answers was made, and the ‘red thread’, the common line throughout most of the answers deals with the fact that the customer service personnel will gain the customer's trust if they are showing respect, politeness, efficiency and empathy, while at the same time keeping the human factor. What this means is that, even though customers know, and want to know, that they are speaking to a professional capable of solving their issue, they will still trust more a person that is also capable of admitting that it is maybe their fault, being down to earth and not arrogant.

*“Being nice, polite, a humbled human being that understands the wants of us customers.”*

Participant

The participants stressed the need to be treated like human beings themselves as well, in order to trust the company and the customer service person they are speaking with. Ignorance, condescending tone of voice, and negative attitude are the most mentioned communicative styles that would make the participants not trust the company, but also

acting 'according to the script', or acting 'like a robot', being superficial, or being dishonestly friendly, are again very much shared negative experiences that the participants had, which made them reconsider using the services of the given company again.

*" [when] What I say is not important. Every human being wants to be important - it's natural."*

Participant

Having customer service personnel that with their positive attitude and communicative style gain the trust of the customer, directly leads to customer satisfaction, since a satisfied customer feels safe and secure in dealing with that certain company. Once gained trust can lead to a returning customer, one who will choose the company above all the others and stay loyal. Trust appeared to be one of the factors that determine if a customer will do business with the company again, based on the participants' answers.

Personalized customer service is the kind of service that will most likely lead to customer satisfaction, trust and loyalty. Providing personalised customer service means that each and every customer should be treated individually, according to their individual needs, and the service will thus be tailored to fit the needs of the individual customer. This way customers will feel like their case is important, and that the customer service is not just applying the 'one fits all' solutions to every customer. By providing the personalized service, the customers are developing long-term relationships with the organization:

*"The increasing depersonalization of professional services means that customers are less likely to develop rewarding long-term relationships with providers"*

Zabava-Ford, 2003:190

*"Trustworthy customer service officer that takes my case personally."*

Participant

However, if a customer feels like they cannot trust the company, they will most probably not do business with that company. This, again, can depend on the communication with the customer service personnel, where the first communicative encounter depends on the interpersonal skills of the personnel, and the customer might paint their whole picture of the company based upon that first encounter. Trust and honesty of the customer service personnel appear to be big factors in deciding whether not to do business with a certain company, according to the participant's answers.

*"Feeding me false info and not delivering the promis[e]."*

Participant

*"When they say one thing but doing complet[e]ly another thing."*

Participant

*"Feeling like they were trying to trick me."*

Participant

One of the factors of why the customers might feel this way, and stop using the provider for services, is related to the communication orientation of the customer service personnel. Functional customer orientation and relational customer orientation are two sets of different communicative behaviors, where in the first one, the behavior is completely focused on the service, cold efficiency disregarding the personal relationship with the customer, and it is defined as a set of task-oriented behaviors.

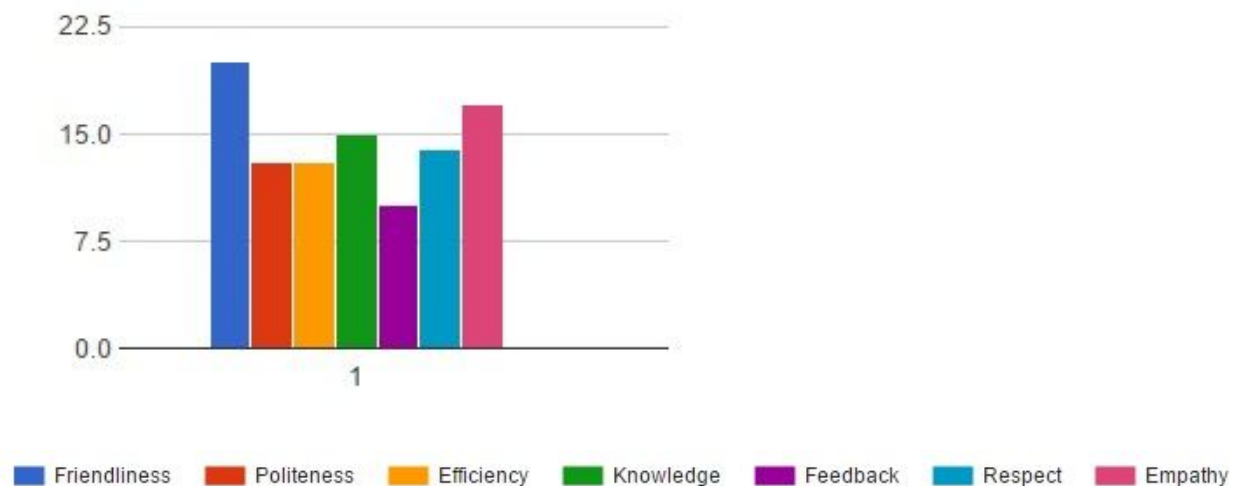
#### 4.1.5 Friendliness

Even though there has been a lot of research in the field of the customer service

communication, it is always difficult to get the concrete examples of what the customers actually want out of communication. This largely depends on the background, culture, habits and country, and that is why it is so difficult to get a 'fit all' answer. For the purposes of this study, a question has been made for the participants to make a decision about which communicative style they would put in the first place as the one that makes them feel most satisfied and most unsatisfied when it comes to styles of communication of the customer service personnel. Figure 2 and Figure 3 show which communicative styles in percentage makes participants the most and the least satisfied. These questions were not made with specific gender, age or country of origin categories, so they represent a general attitude and preference of the entire number of participants regardless of those categories.

**Figure 2.**

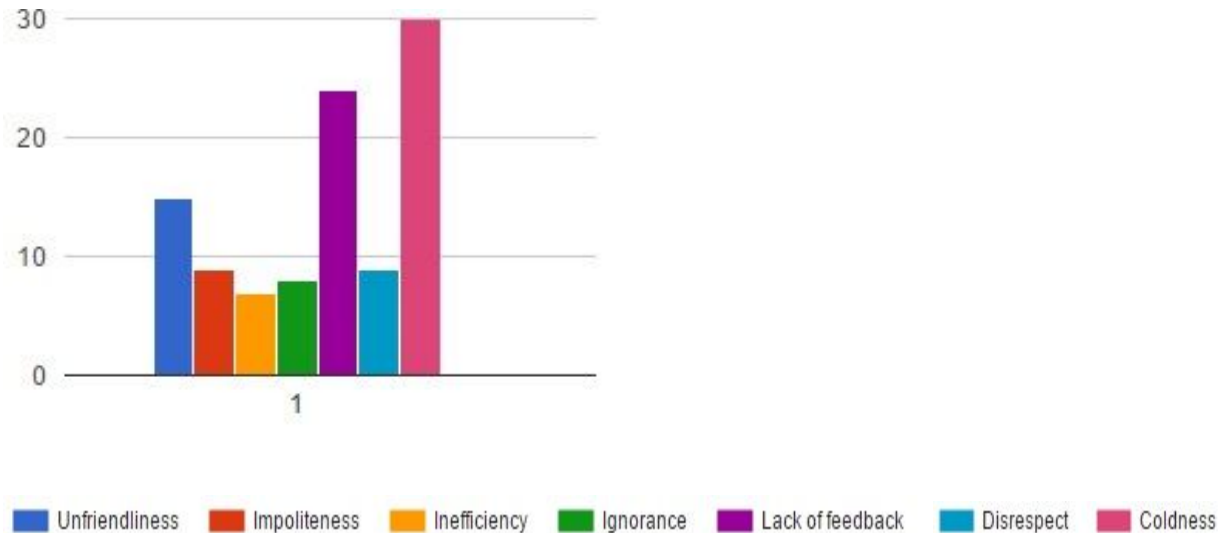
I feel satisfied if a person in a telephone based customer service communicates:



Where friendliness got 20% of total answers, empathy 17%, knowledge 14%, respect 14%, efficiency 13%, politeness 12%, and feedback 10%.

**Figure 3.**

I feel dissatisfied if person in a telephone based customer service communicates:



Where coldness got 30% of total answers, lack of feedback 24%, unfriendliness 14%, impoliteness 9%, ignorance 8%, disrespect 8%, and inefficiency 7%.

Figure 3 shows that 54% of the study participants chose coldness and lack of feedback as the communicative styles they feel the most relate to their dissatisfaction. Both of these qualities relate to the concept of friendliness, meaning that the customers, in this case, value the friendly style of communicating more than the efficiency and knowledge of a customer service. The same way, these results show that the customers would be forgiving of ignorance or inefficiency, as long as the customer service employee does not communicate in a cold manner.

Table 4. shows that 68% of the study participants think that a customer service employee calling them by their personal name is a sign of friendliness. According to Zabava Ford (1999:343) a friendly communicative style of customer service is used to create an immediate "bond" between the customer and service provider. Some of the common examples of this communicative service styles include greetings, small talk,

humor, and the use of names.

**Table 4.**

If a customer service person calls me by my name, I would consider that:

	Female	Male	Under 30	30 or over	Born in: Sweden	Born in: Other
Friendly	36%	32%	40%	28%	21%	47%
Patronizing	16%	16%	11%	21%	16%	16%

In this case, there is no significant percentual difference between answers of any of the participants' categories, except for the group of those who are 30 or older of age. A possible explanation for this might be that the participants above 30 years of age think that their age deserves more respect shown by calling them by their title or last name, and hearing a customer service employee using their first name is considered patronizing and underestimating of their knowledge and experience. The participants below 30 years of age think of this style as friendly, since they might belong to the student population and don't have a title established, or simply feel too young to be called by their last names. The customer service employee can easily determine the exact age of the customer, by referring to the database, and thus determine in which style and how to proceed with the communication.

When asked to tell about the best experiences with a telephone based customer service they have ever had, the study participants in their elaborated answers often wrote about how the most memorable and the best ones were when they felt friendliness and some sort of human connection with the customer service personnel.

*“The other day I needed to postpone my phonebill, talked to the friendliest best person ever. I want to be his friend, for real. Also the fact that he asked if there was anything else he could help with afterwards.”*

Participant



*“She was friendly - started off with a sympathetic tone, listened carefully, asked the right questions, and helped me complete the process.”*

Participant

The communicative style that is not considered friendly is a manipulative communication style, where a customer service employee might use the strategic communicative principles in order to steer the customer’s behaviors. Manipulative service communication involves attempts to deceive or control customers, usually in order to achieve the selling of the product, and/or avoiding of giving the right solution to the customer’s issue due to inefficiency or ignorance, or in some cases, even the organization’s policy. Some examples of manipulative customer service communicative styles include fake smiles, focus on the selling, threats and rewards, bureaucratic routines, coldness and emotional detachment from customers, the use of standardized "scripts" on all the customers, and attempts to dominate in which direction the customer- customer service personnel interaction will go (Zabava Ford, 1999:343).

Customers usually detect this communicative style, and the extensive and exclusive use of it might lead to dissatisfaction and customer loss.

*“Being patronised and a complete lack of empathy with my problems”*

Participant

*“Unfriendly customer service at telephone agencies who do not listen and are patronizing.”*

Participant

## 5. Conclusion

This study concludes that the communication between the customer and the employees of a telephone based customer service may be of crucial importance to the organization, in terms of building future relationships where a satisfied customer is a loyal customer. A positive connection has been found between the so called “warm” communication styles, and the customer satisfaction. More specifically the friendliness and the personalized service, where every customer gets the understanding, empathy and feedback needed - all the qualities of a friendly communicative style, appear to be the most appreciated and positive styles.

At the same time, the results indicate that the most negative and dissatisfying communicative styles seem to be coldness, lack of feedback and dominant styles, where the customers don't feel like they matter, but that the organization only cares about selling the product, and the employees communicate according to a script. There were no significant oscillations in terms of gender, age and the country of birth in the presented results, meaning that the total number of one hundred participants have had similar opinions, regardless of these variables.

This study deepens the understanding of the preferred communicative styles, and its findings agree with the theoretical implications, where the interpersonal communication, and the manner, the ‘how’ the information is being communicated matter the most, and that the customers would be willing to maybe tolerate some inefficiency, and ignorance, as long as the customer service employee is being friendly, human and understanding. The analysis shows that the communicative accommodation and finding the right ratio of the communicative styles depending on the nature of the issue and the customer's preference, offers the most optimal outcome for both the customer and the organization.

The importance of this study lies in the fact that it offers concrete examples of which

styles are the most negative and the most positive ones, in a communicative context, and which ones lead to customer satisfaction. Therefore, the findings of this study are valuable to organizations, managers, employees, students, researchers and trainers of interpersonal and organizational communication, as well as for the future research dealing with comparisons of the different customer/customer service perspectives.

## **5.1 Managerial Implications**

This study offers the customer perspective on the issue of positive and negative styles, and this perspective is valuable since it suggests in which direction the organizations can train their customer service employees, in order to communicatively approach their customers in the most appropriate way possible. This study does not offer ‘word-for-word’ training, but the findings might be used as guidelines which show that listening to the customer first, and then deciding how to go on with the communicative process, results in providing the properly tailored, unique service that fits the individual needs. Findings of whether to use the first name, humor and regular feedback, according to the customers gender, age and the nature of issue, can help in gaining a satisfied, loyal customer that feels comfortable with using the services. Based on the analysis and the results, it seems like there is no unique approach, but rather a suggestion that the employees must be trained in order to recognize the type of customer, but also to act accordingly when it comes to the organization’s nature, in order to employ the right communicative style. A right combination of styles might be the most beneficial one.

## **5.2 Suggestions for Further Research**

Since this study deals with telephone based customer service communication in general, one of the suggestions would be to carry on the research for specific businesses

and organizations, and therefore the target groups of those businesses and organizations as well.

Furthermore, this study deals with the customers living in Sweden only, meaning that both those who were born in Sweden and those who moved to Sweden, have similar perceptions of the issue. For these reasons, any generalizations based upon this study are not recommended, and the suggestion for further research would be to include different cultural perspectives of the countries for which the studies are being made, in order to capture the different perceptions of the communicative styles in customer service.

Finally, because of the time limitations, and the type of study, there was no statistical analysis of the data. Even though the data was analysed and presented in percentages, no further statistical study was made in order to investigate if there are any correlations between the variables, and how the presented tendencies might have influenced one another. For the sake of showing if any of the given variables influenced the occurrence of the other, i.e. showing causality, a further analysis of statistical nature would be a recommendation for a bigger volume study that would afford dealing with such detailed data and analysis.

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# ATTACHMENT 1

## Ethical Consideration

This survey is targeted only to people who live in Sweden and have experience contacting a telephone based customer service.

The data collected in this survey will be used in a Master Thesis conducted at Gothenburg University for the Master in Communication program.

By completing this survey you agree to participate in the study where all the answers are anonymous, revealing no personal information.

Further questions about the survey, or thesis can be directed to the author at [gustraam@student.gu.se](mailto:gustraam@student.gu.se).

Thank you for participating in this survey. Your feedback is important.

Regards,

Amra Trako



## ATTACHMENT 2

### Survey questions

#### **Section 1**

Which country do you live in?

Which country were you born in?

Do you have experience with contacting a telephone based customer service?

What is your age?

What is your gender?

#### **Section 2**

Customer service person is someone who represents the face of the company:

If a customer service person calls me by my name, I would consider that:

Customer service person making a joke during the conversation is something I consider:

Customer service person giving feedback (“mmmh”, “yes” “I see”) at the same as I am speaking is in my opinion a:

#### **Section 3**

What would you describe as the best experience with a telephone based customer service you have ever had?

What would you describe as the worst experience with a telephone based customer service you have ever had?

The customer service person will gain my trust if:

The customer service person will gain my distrust if:

When you think of your experience with a person from the telephone based customer service, what is it that made you do business with the company again?

When you think of your experience with a person from the telephone based customer

service, what is it that made you not do business with the company again?

#### **Section 4**

I feel satisfied if a person in a telephone based customer service communicates:

Give grades to which communication styles of a telephone based customer service you think is the most important one (grading from 1 to 7). Observe you can only give one grade per style.

1. Friendliness
2. Politeness
3. Efficiency
4. Knowledge
5. Feedback
6. Respect
7. Empathy

I feel unsatisfied if a person in a telephone based customer service communicates:

Give grades to which communication styles of a telephone based customer service you think is the least negative (1), and the most negative (7). Observe you can only give one grade per style.

1. Unfriendliness
2. Impoliteness
3. Inefficiency
4. Ignorance
5. Lack of feedback
6. Disrespect
7. Coldness

## ATTACHMENT 3

### Some of the questions that were not analysed:

In communicating with a customer service person I like and appreciate:

In communicating with a customer service person I dislike and don't appreciate:

### Some of the answers that were not analysed:

“Answers”

“To get my problem solved.”

“Do not remember”

“Dont know”

“See no 1”

“Can't recall”

“I got 1 million dollars”

“Many things”

“I have no choice”

“See above.”

“The above answers”

“Not applicable”

“The above answers”

“Same answer as above”

“All my questions got answered and solved.”

“Help”

“One that hung up quickly.”

“No experience on that”

“Can't think of one”

“i don't know. Sorry”

“Professionally can help me”

“They are just professional”

“Professional”

“a nice chat”

“No”

“See previous response”