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# Improving Customer Satisfaction Through Customer - Front Line Employee Communication

Communication Guide for B2B Service Environment

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One year ago I applied to this industrial management program. In the fall I was accepted to study with a talented group of students. In the year from applying to today, I have learned so much from these inspiring people representing so many different fields. All that I have learned has made this situation possible. I started to work for a new employer – Scania Suomi Oy - and in the first three months, working for the company, I have written a thesis for them. It is an achievement I am proud of.

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<p>This thesis designs a customer-front line employee communication guide to a company selling B2B Services. The company in question uses service quality as a competitive advantage. Service quality can be measured by measuring customer satisfaction. There was a clear need for improving customer satisfaction. Communication is a key aspect, affecting customer satisfaction. Accordingly, a communication guide was designed to improve customer satisfaction.</p> <p>This study was conducted as action research. Customer satisfaction index survey results were used as a starting point for the improvement project. The main problem areas were identified and used as basis for research of available knowledge in literature. The literature focused mainly on how communication relates to customer satisfaction, in addition to value creation and relationship sales. The literature further covered increasing customer satisfaction and loyalty, and eliminating conflict. The available knowledge was used as a basis for key stakeholder interviews. Key stakeholder insights were collected in two workshops, with two participants in each and two face-face interviews. The interview results were combined with the literature findings and CSI data. The result of this combination was used to build an initial communication guide. The initial guide was introduced to the key stakeholders to gather feedback. This feedback was the basis for the final communication guide proposal.</p> <p>The study concludes on the notion of communication being a repetitious loop. This loop can be used by the front line employees, to improve the customer experience, by deepening the relationship, according to relationship sales tactics. The ultimate goal is to improve customer satisfaction and customer loyalty.</p> <p>The outcome of this thesis is a communication guide on customer-front line employee communication. This communication guide can be used to train new front line employees to communicate in a way that increases customer satisfaction. It also gives the new employees an overall idea of correct conduct at the front line. It can also be used in follow up training of front line employees.</p>	
Keywords	Communication, Communication guide, customer communication, customer satisfaction

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## 1 Introduction

The goal of this Thesis is to improve customer satisfaction in a Business-to-Business Service context. More specifically, the goal is to improve the customer satisfaction index in a commercial vehicle maintenance and repair workshop. Customer satisfaction is an important indicator for business performance. It can be linked to the number of recurring customers, customer spending and customer behaviour in conflict situations. A satisfied customer is more likely to come again; he is also likely to buy more. If something goes wrong, a loyal customer that has been satisfied in the past is easier to come to an agreement with than a new customer or someone who has bad experiences before. Further on, a satisfied customer is more likely to recommend the company to his peers, which in turn will bring new customers (Vesterinen 2014 p.12).

Maintenance and repair services can be offered by competitors, even without product sales. This type of competition without own product sales have a possible customer base by servicing more brands of similar products. They also tend to have lower operational costs, for example lower employee costs, because no product sales are needed. These types of competitors are seriously threatening the business of the case company of this study, and, therefore, a strategy is needed to tackle them. A successful strategy, is differentiating from the competition with superior customer service. This is a further argument for improving customer satisfaction.

### 1.1 Business Context

The case company of this Thesis is Scania Suomi Oy, a part of Scania Group with international headquarters in Sweden. The case company has three core businesses in Finland: Product Sales, Service Sales and Financing services. The Products Sales sell heavy trucks, heavy buses, industrial engines and used trucks. The Service Sales offered by the case company include a variety of services, from traditional workshop services, e.g. spare parts, maintenance and repair, to business services e.g. driver education and fleet management. Financial services are separated from the other services, and include among others financial leases and insurances.

The case unit in this thesis is the service sales, namely heavy truck maintenance, repair and spare part services for customers of the case company. Normally, the heavy truck customers are transport businesses operating from Finland, either inside Finland or Internationally.

In 2016, the heavy truck sales reached 2599 units in Finland. Out of this, the case company sold 949 units, or 37% of the total. Currently, the brand represented by the case company is one of the two top heavy truck sellers in Finland, with the market share for the top two being 68% in 2016. The two companies on the top have stayed the same for over ten years, while changing the leader position periodically. Importantly, the case company brand has not achieved this leading market position by price competition, but through competing on reliability of its products and the quality of its services. As the case company brand is considered to be a premium brand, this makes service quality an integral part of business strategy in both product sales and sales of services.

These arguments highlight the importance of high service quality in all case company maintenance and repair workshops, as a means to compete in the market. It is important to stress, that competitors in heavy truck sales are different from the competitors in maintenance and repair services. Normally, maintenance and repair workshops, which are owned by a company that conducts heavy truck sales, are concentrated on their house brand. Accordingly, in services, the competition for the case company comes from multi-brand workshops. These competitors can be both single workshops as well as workshop chains. These competitors are more flexible with prices because they are not limited to using the brand spare parts. Instead, they can choose the cheapest parts available. Moreover, they do not need to follow rigorous operational standards, which are strictly observed in the case company. Also, the hourly tariff of competitors is often lower than in the company workshops. Thus, with the company maintenance and repair workshops being a more expensive choice, it puts a special emphasis on the importance of high quality services.

Additionally, since a great deal of perceived service quality comes from customer interaction, this area also requires special attention. As most interactions with customers happen in maintenance and repair workshops, the workshop employees need to have the appropriate skills to make sure the customer visit is as smooth as possible. This is a further argument as to why communication skills and customer satisfaction needs to be focused on at the case company repair workshops.

## 1.2 Business Challenge, Objective and Outcome

Presently, the case company delivers its maintenance and repair services through 20 fully owned dealer workshops and 6 contract dealer workshops in Finland. Similarly to the fully owned dealer workshops, the contract dealers are expected to provide high quality of services and achieve high customer satisfaction. The perceived quality of service can be measured with the Customer Satisfaction Index (CSI). In 2016, the case company implemented a new CSI measurement system for the dealers.

The CSI results of some dealers have raised concerns and their performance should be improved, not to impair business performance on the long run. But even beyond these immediate concerns, even though the current state of service quality may be sufficient, the competition is putting pressure on the case company to make constant improvements. Also, the customer expectations rise with the time and, therefore, the available quality needs improvement.

Therefore, the objective of this thesis is:

*to propose a communication guide to improve customer - front line employee communication causing critical customer dissatisfaction, at one case dealer workshop.*

Due to the fact that the case company has multiple dealer workshops in Finland, the improvements are focused on one dealer workshop at first, after which the process can be repeated at other dealer workshops. Accordingly, the outcome of this thesis is a communication guide for one dealer workshop, with recommendations for its implication. The communication guide aims to improve the maintenance and repair workshop performance on communication that have caused dissatisfaction; which in turn should impact on the customer satisfaction index measurements. The implication recommendations are made to encourage the use of these guidelines. In future, the process of this thesis may serve as a guide for designing actions for further improvements at other dealer workshops.

## 1.3 Thesis Outline

The scope of this study is limited to improving the dealer maintenance and repair services at one workshop (excluding another big area of dealer functions, the sales). This



is possible because the Customer Satisfaction Index (CSI) of dealers is measured separately for (a) sales and (b) maintenance and repair workshops (dealer workshop). Moreover, these processes of the dealer functions are too different to be studied together. Presently, the heavy truck maintenance and repair is the largest branch of services by the case company that is offered at the dealer workshops. Also as mentioned above, dealer workshops have significant competition. These facts grounded the decision to focus on dealer maintenance and repair service improvement and not dealer sales.

In this thesis at first one dealer workshop of the case company is chosen by analysing available CSI Data. The same data is used to map out the problem areas at the dealer workshop. Then the current state of the identified problem areas is studied in more detail to focus the research appropriately. Thereafter the literature about the problem areas is studied. Using the literature findings, key stakeholders are interviewed to create an initial proposal for communication guide, for the case dealer workshop. This initial guide is presented to the key stakeholders and management for feedback. This feedback is then used to design a final proposal for communication guidelines.

This thesis is written in seven sections. Section 1 is the Introduction. Section 2 described the research approach, research design and data collection used in this Thesis. Section 3 presents the results of the current state analysis. Section 4 discusses available knowledge and best practice related to improving customer satisfaction in the areas identified in the current state analysis, Section 5 contains the proposal for the action plan how to improve key problem areas. Section 6 presents the results of the validation session and proposes the final communication guide proposal. Finally, section 7 presents the summary and evaluation of the Thesis.

## 2 Method and Material

This section introduces the research approach and the research design. Thereafter, this section describes the data collection and analysis for this thesis.

### 2.1 Research Approach

This thesis is conducted as a qualitative empirical action research. This research approach is selected due to the nature of Action research fitting the purpose of this study. Action research can be described as: 'a deliberate, cyclical process of planning, taking action and evaluating' (Coghlan D. & Brannick T. 1996 according to Huhta M. 2014). This means that at first the problem, for example in the company, is defined and observed. Then improvements are defined using available knowledge, from literature and from the observations. These improvements are then put into practice and the results are evaluated. The process can be started anew after the evaluation, if for example the improvement was not sufficient enough. This cyclical process is suitable for continuous improvement enabling smaller changes in intervals. Thus giving a better possibility to measure the results of each change.

The idea of action research is to answer a research question and at the same time solve a practical need (Rapoport 1970, according to Blichfeldt and Andersen 2006 p.4). If compared, case study and action research both concentrate on actually found problems in real life, in a company for example (Blichfeldt and Andersen 2006 p.3). However, action research leaves more room for co-creation of the solution (Blichfeldt and Andersen 2006 p.4). This means that action research and case studies are both suitable approaches to real life problems. However, action research includes the informants into the discussion and through their direct involvement they are more committed to the result.

Although action research has been found often to lack rigor (Näslund et al. 2010 p. 347) the benefit of it is a high grade of relevance especially for the case company if, one is involved. This lack of rigor can be tackled in several ways. Four of which according to Blichfeldt and Andersen (2006 p.8) are increasing transparency declaring prior notions and frameworks, discussing transferability, and defining appropriate forms of accumulation of results.

Finally, action research is selected as a research approach since customer satisfaction improvement is an ongoing process. The steps described in this thesis can be iterated to further improve customer satisfaction, after the suggested communication guide has been implemented. Accordingly, on the next cycle the improvements may concentrate on another area of the case company. However, the full cycle of action research is not possible to complete in this study due to lack of time for a full scale pilot of the improvement project. Instead the pilot will be substituted by validation interviews, for the validation of the initial action plan.

## 2.2 Research Design

This study is conducted following the research design shown in Figure 1 below. The research design illustrates the entire research process of this study.



Figure 1. Research design for this study.

As Figure 1 shows, there are five key steps in this study. Each step has a heading that crystalizes the content of the step and the outcome of each step is highlighted in yellow. If research data was collected for the step this is seen on the left as an arrow.

The study starts with specifying the business challenge and setting Objective for the study. This step is followed by the current state analysis, conducted based on the CSI data (Data 1) from the measurement system. This questionnaire investigates customer satisfaction in different aspects of the service, and also includes the possibility for open feedback. In this study the results of this questionnaire are used as Data 1 collection. This data is evaluated to choose a suitable dealer maintenance and repair workshop to be improved. After that the CSI data for the dealer workshop in question is separated from the pool of data on 26 workshops and researched in more detail. The outcome of this stage is the key problem areas causing customer dissatisfaction at the specific dealer workshop. These key problem areas are then analysed more thoroughly with the help of the customer care course material (Data1), to focus the area of research.

Next, these focused key problems are taken as direction for literature search, which results in a conceptual framework for building the improvement proposal for the case company. This framework merges the relevant key elements of available knowledge to improve the key problems identified. The framework is also used in designing the interviews for the communication guide building. This interview data (Data 2) contains insights from the key stakeholders about improving the key problem areas. The goal is to relate best practice with a real-life case and in that way find individual solutions to the key problems. The interview data is used together with the conceptual framework to build an initial communication guide on customer-front line employee communication, and so to improve the dealer workshop performance causing customer dissatisfaction.

Finally, the initial communication guide is validated with the key stakeholders to identify any shortcomings of the initial proposal. The goal is to find out if the proposed communication guide fits the case company, and are the suggestions of the communication guide logically sound, when evaluated by customer service experts (Interviewees of Data 3). For validation of the initial plan, the key stakeholders are interviewed and the interview data (Data 3) is then utilized in the final action plan.

## 2.3 Data Collection and Analysis

The data for this study was collected in three rounds. Data 1 was collected through the CSI measurement system and from the Customer Care course material that is in use at the case company. Data 2 was collected from interviews with the key stakeholders. Data 3 was collected as feedback in interviews for the proposal from the key stakeholders. The details of data collection are shown in Table 1 below.

Table 1. Details of data collection.

DATA STAGE	OBJECT OF DATA	OUTCOME OF DATA	DATA SOURCES	DURATION	DATE
Data 1	- Understanding causes for customer dissatisfaction	- List of key problem areas	- Customer Satisfaction Index survey (737 individual completed surveys)	12 months	2016 - 2017
Data 1	- Understanding how the key problem areas are currently handled at the case company	- Focused area for further research	- Customer care course material of the case company	-	-
Data 2	- Co-creation of communication guide	- Initial communication guide	- Workshop 1 Front line employees 1 & 2	65 minutes	12.4.17
Data 2	- Co-creation of communication guide	- Initial communication guide	- Workshop 2 Front line employees 3 & 4	47 minutes	12.4.17
Data 2	- Co-creation of communication guide	- Initial communication guide	- Interview 1 Customer service manager 1	35 minutes	12.4.17
Data 2	- Co-creation of communication guide	- Initial communication guide proposal	- Interview 2 Customer	16 minutes	12.4.17
Data 3	- Getting initial proposal tested	- final communication guide proposal	- interview 3 Customer service manager	45 minutes	24.4.17
Data 3	- Getting initial proposal tested	- final communication guide proposal	- interview 4 front line employee 2	25 minutes	24.4.17
Data 3	- Getting initial proposal tested	- final communication guide proposal	- interview 5 Process improvement manager	55 minutes	25.4.17

Table 1 shows the purpose for each data collection and outcome of each data collection round. It also shows the stakeholders that were interviewed and the time line for the data collection.

Data 1 was analyzed to select a dealer workshop and identify the problem areas in the maintenance and repair services at this selected dealer workshop. Data 1 consisted of the Customer Satisfaction survey and measured the Customer Satisfaction Index (CSI) conducted by the company in 2016. This customer satisfaction data was collected from the company customers throughout Finland, in a web-questionnaire. The data includes quantitative and qualitative elements. In this study, the *quantitative* results from CSI pointed to the selection of a dealer workshop for improvement. After that, the *qualitative* results from the customers were analyzed to identify the problem areas causing customer dissatisfaction at this specific workshop. Thus, Data 1 used in this stage was the secondary data, provided by the company. The second part of Data 1 was two course books provided by the case company.

Data 2 was collected to develop the draft of the action plan for training employees. Data 2 was collected from external and internal interviews. The key stakeholders in this study include: (a) one customer, (b) 4 frontline employees who are in regular contact with the customers and (c) the supervisor of these employees. In this study, the supervisor of the frontline employees is the customer service manager of the selected dealer workshop. The frontline employees are technical specialists (mostly engineers). They are either foremen, responsible for the technicians and service sales, or spare part sales people responsible for internal and external spare part sales, at the specific dealer workshop. The Customer is the owner of a transport company operating in Finland.

The goal of these interviews was to co-create the draft of the communication guide to improve customer-front line employee communication. Thus, Data 2 used in this stage was the primary data, collected by the researcher himself. The questions for the interviewees were formulated based on the outcome of the current state analysis and conceptual framework.

Data 3 was collected as feedback for the initial version of the action plan. Data 3 was collected as a series of interviews with the key stakeholders, after the initial version of the communication guide was presented to them. Interviewees for Data 3 were: (b) 1 frontline employee, (c) the supervisor of the front line employees and (d) the process improvement manager of the case company. Thus, Data 3 used in this stage was the primary data, collected by the researcher himself. Interview questions were formulated to focus on the suitability and functionality of communication guide as a solution for the specific problem areas.

The qualitative data collected in this study was analyzed using the thematic content analysis. A summary of the filed notes for Data 2 and Data 3 is found in Appendices 1 and 2.

### 3 Current State Analysis

This section analyses the current state of one selected dealer workshop. First, the section overviews how the current state analysis is conducted. After that, the analysis identifies the problem areas with the help of CSI data. The current actions taken regarding the key problem areas are analysed. Finally, this section concludes with the selection of one key problem to be improved.

#### 3.1 Overview of Current State Analysis Stage

The goal of the current state analysis (CSA) stage is to identify problems causing customer dissatisfaction through the example of one selected dealer workshop. The analysis is based on the Customer Satisfaction survey, and more precisely, the Customer Satisfaction Index (CSI) data collected by the case company in 2016.

First, the current state analysis overviews the CSI measuring system by explaining what the customers are asked in the questionnaire and how the CSI is calculated. After that, the selection of the specific dealer workshop is done (out of 26 dealer workshops in the case company) and explained in more detail. This is done based on the quantitative CSI data provided by the case company.

Next, the qualitative data for this specific dealer workshop is analysed in detail and the key problem areas are singled out. Finally, this section summarizes the key problem areas causing customer dissatisfaction at this specific dealer workshop to indicate the focus areas for the next stage, which is used as starting point in search for best practices.

#### 3.2 Customer Satisfaction Survey Conducted in the Case Company

The case company follows its customer satisfaction with the Customer Satisfaction survey, part of which is the Customer Satisfaction Index (CSI). These CSI and loyalty index are calculated separately for (a) dealer sales and (b) dealer workshop. The data for the CSI is collected via a web survey, which is provided by Gesellschaft für Konsumforschung (GfK), the German society for consumer research. This survey is provided through the international headquarters in Sweden.



The Customer Satisfaction survey has three types of questions. The questions of the survey are shown in Table 2 below.

Table 2. Structure of the Customer Satisfaction survey (CSI questions by the data type).

I. QUANTITATIVE QUESTIONS	II. YES / NO QUESTIONS	III. QUALITATIVE QUESTIONS
1. overall performance 2. effort of staff to help 3. knowledgeability of staff 4. vehicle ready on time 5. quality of work 6. explanation of work done 7. facilities overall 8. handling of complaints 9. flexibility 10. spare part availability 11. information while in service 12. likeliness to recommend 13. likeliness of revisit	(a) was it a regular workshop visit (maintenance vs repair) (b) was the vehicle fixed at first visit (c) did you get a quote beforehand (d) did you get a quote for the work to be done (e) was all work done that was agreed upon (f) do you wish to be contacted regarding this survey	A. other remarks B. what is the reason for not recommending C. why are you not satisfied overall D. why was the vehicle not ready on time

As seen in Table 1, first, the quantitative questions focus on specific aspects of the service; second, the yes/no questions focus on getting basic information about the quality and responsiveness in the service, and third, the qualitative questions ask for the reasons behind specific opinions.

First, the quantitative results are used for the calculation of the CSI and the loyalty index. For calculating the CSI, the average of the quantitative data is calculated from the customer responses on the scale 1-5. The customers are asked to evaluate the aspect in question on the scale from 1-5, for example: *How likely are you to recommend the dealer workshop*, with grade 1 being *definitely not* and 5 being *definitely yes*. These responses are then transformed for the calculation in a scale where 5=10, 4=6, 3=1, 2=-8 and 1=-10.

The *loyalty index* on the other hand is calculated by adding up such results as: 8a) likeliness to recommend (LRC), (b) likeliness of revisit (LRV) and (c) overall Satisfaction (OS), while each number has an own multiplier. The calculation looks as follows:

$$LRC*0,5 + LRV*0,2 + OS*0,3 = \text{Loyalty index}$$

The CSI and loyalty index are calculated as averages for the chosen area. For example, for a single workshop, the customer feedback of customers on this specific dealer workshop is used. While for calculating these numbers for Finland, all customer feedback is used. This is mentioned to clarify that the numbers for Finland are not calculated from the averages of the different workshops but from the data available for the whole country.

Next, the *yes / no* questions are used to specify some customer responses behind the CSI and the Loyalty index. The *yes / no* questions are used for two main reasons. The first one is to get an idea of reasons behind the quantitative feedback, for example, if the vehicle was not fixed at the first visit and some agreed work was not done at all, the customer may not give high evaluations for *'vehicle ready on time'* and *'likeliness to recommend'*. The second reason is that the case company international headquarters in Sweden wishes to thematically follow the performance of the dealer workshops on aspects they deem as important. For example, during this survey the focus was placed on the speed and responsiveness of the service, namely: *'Was the vehicle fixed at first visit'*.

Finally, the qualitative feedback is used as a source of understanding and improvement to get the reasons behind the evaluation in the quantitative feedback. Qualitative feedback helps to map out the key problem areas causing customer dissatisfaction, so that the cause of poor performance is understood and therefore an attempt can be made to improve the performance.

The CSI data used in this thesis consisted of 737 individual completed surveys, and was collected in 2016. Out of these, 275 survey responses contained some qualitative feedback. The overall response rate for whole Finland is approximately 20% which is regarded as adequate at the company international headquarters in Sweden. The CSI survey is sent via email to all customers that visit the workshops, shortly after the visit. The survey uses a time of three months before sending a new survey. This means that if the customer visits the dealer workshop within three months of the last visit, a new survey is not sent.

### 3.3 Selection of Dealer Workshop to Improve

Based on the results of the Customer satisfaction survey and CSI from 2016, this study selected the Turku dealer workshop for improvement. The selection of the case dealer

workshop was made based on the CSI and loyalty index that was lower for the Turku workshop than generally in Finland (Figure 2).

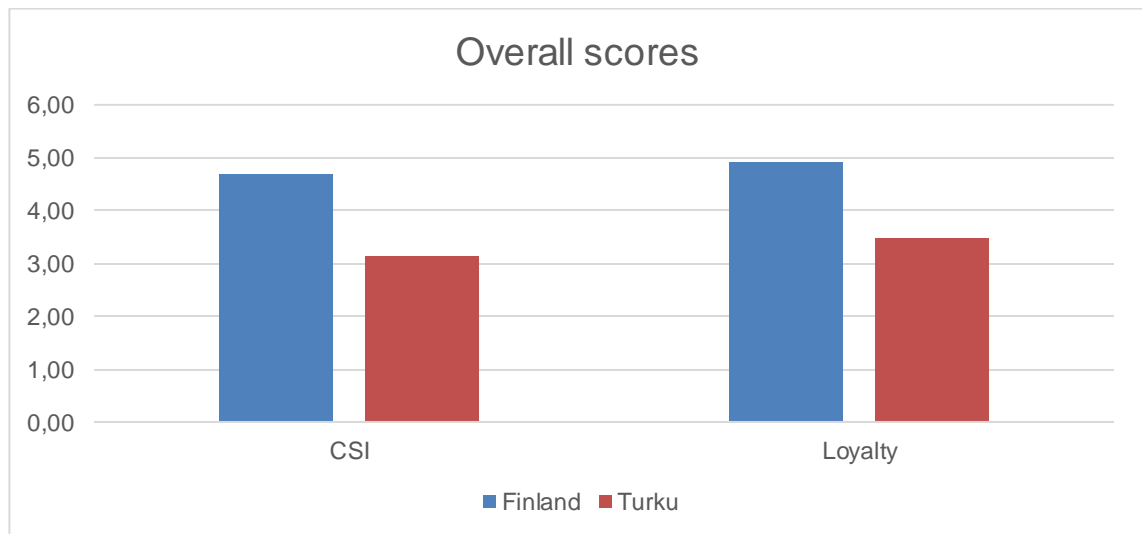


Figure 2. Overall scores for CSI and loyalty index

As seen in Figure 2, the CSI average for the whole Finland was 4,71 and the loyalty index 4,92. The CSI and loyalty index of the selected workshop in Turku are significantly below the Finnish average. For Turku, the CSI was 3,14 and the loyalty index was 3,48. The CSI results for the selected workshop in Turku come from 78 completed surveys, from which 29 have qualitative feedback. In fact, this selected workshop is second to last in the CSI ranking. The two other dealer workshops ranking last in the CSI survey were Kemi (last in ranking) and Oulu (one above Turku in ranking). Since the journeys to their customers could not have been easily conducted in the limited time available for this study, the workshop selected for improvements was Turku.

The results for the different questions to determine the CSI are shown below in Figure 3 with the Finnish average as comparison.

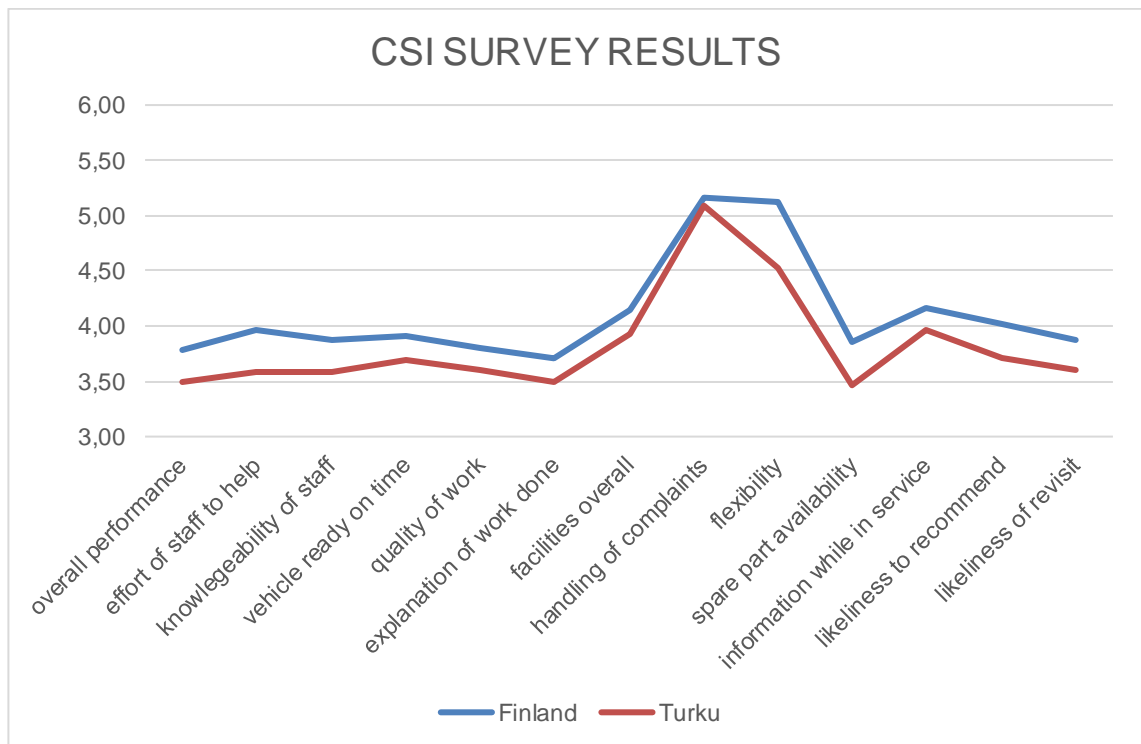


Figure 3. CSI SURVEY RESULTS comparing Turku and Finland quantitative results (2016).

Figure 3 further emphasizes the below average results of the selected workshop in Turku. As seen in Table 3, the lack in performance does not come down to a single factor, but is rather systematic throughout the questions.

The Turku dealer workshop is one of the largest dealers of the case company in Finland. This is noticeable in the fact that over 10% of all feedback comes from Turku, although it is important to note that Turku was included in the piloting phase of this new CSI survey. Turku was one of the dealer workshops that started the CSI follow-ups with this system already in March 2016, while other dealer workshops joined in September 2016. This means that there is also more data due to a longer collection period and not only due to dealer workshop size. This should be kept in mind as it shows that the lower performance in customer satisfaction has been evident for almost a year.

As mentioned the dealer workshop in Turku is one of the largest dealers in Finland. Naturally, this is reflected in the number of customers. Accordingly, improving the performance in Turku has an impact on more customers than improving the performance of a smaller dealer.

The below average performance in the CSI survey is the main reason for selecting Turku as the dealer workshop to be improved. Other reasons are size of the dealer workshop, amount of data available, specifically the amount of qualitative data available, and proximity to the company national headquarters in Helsinki. The next step is to analyse the qualitative feedback available for this dealer workshop.

### 3.4 Analysing Qualitative Feedback

As mentioned, the Turku dealer workshop of the case company had 78 completed surveys from March 2016 to the end of February 2017. In 29 cases, the customers had left qualitative feedback about the performance of the Turku dealer workshop of the case company. Most of this feedback was given as other remarks. Nearly all of them contained criticism. The feedback is summarized in Table 3 below and is grouped according to the areas the customers have complained about.

Table 3. Summary of qualitative feedback (grouped according to complaint areas).

Types	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11
Feedback	Time	Skills	Attitude	Pricing (spares)	communication	Part availability	Pricing (other)	faulty diagnosis	Quality	Brand	Service Agreement
1		1									
2							1		1		
3	1										
4	1				1						
5	1	1	1								
6	1	1	1								
7											
8				1				1			
9		1									
10	1		1								
11			1	1	1						
12			1								
13							1				
14					1						
15											
16				1							
17								1			
18										1	
19	1					1					
20											1
21						1					
22	1										
23						1					
24		1									
25				1							
26											
27				1							
28											
29											
Feedback	Time	Skills	Attitude	Pricing (spares)	communication	Part availability	Pricing (other)	Faulty diagnosis	Quality	Brand	Service Agreement
Total	7	5	5	5	3	3	2	2	1	1	1

Table 3 summarizes the 29 pieces of qualitative feedback from the Turku workshop customers. The first column shows identification of the individual survey number. This is to be able to follow from where this specific piece of information is coming from, if the feedback given is to be reanalysed.

Each piece of feedback was analysed for the types of complaint. The types of complaint identified in this data are: (1) complaints about time management in the dealer workshop (Time), (2) complaints about the employee skills (Skills), (3) complaints about the employee attitudes (Attitude), (4) complaints about spare part pricing (Pricing (spares)), (5) complaints about the communication of the employees (communication), (6) complaints about spare part availability (Part availability), (7) complaints about pricing other than spare-parts (Pricing (other)), (8) complaints about faulty diagnosis (Faulty diagnosis), (9) complaints about specific lacks in quality of work (Quality), (10) overall dissatisfaction in Scania brand (Brand) and (11) dissatisfaction about the content of the service agreement (Service Agreement).

If a piece of feedback has a specific type of complaint, the row has a mark “1” in that column. For example, feedback 4 reads:

*"Notification about the vehicle getting ready should be improved, so that the vehicle does not stand outside for no reason. Also if an estimate for the service to get ready is given, the customer should be notified immediately if the completion is delayed, so that there are no unnecessary arrangements for pickup made." (Feedback 4)*

This feedback 4 is analysed as type (1) a complaint about time management and type (5) the communication skills of the workshop employees. Accordingly, the row for feedback 4 has a “1” in both the ‘Time’ column and in the ‘Communication’ column. On the last row of the table, the total counts of specific types of complaints mentioned in this piece of feedback are summed up.

Here, the researcher needs to be aware of the challenges of analysing this type of qualitative feedback. Qualitative feedback is rather intangible and therefore it is important to note that some feedback might be interpreted in several different ways and data interpretation might take many directions. For example, it can be argued that essentially time management problems hail from the lack of employee skills, or that many communication problems are in fact attitude problems. Therefore, in this study, the decision was made that in this phase as little as possible is interpreted and rather more complaint categories are taken into account than misunderstanding the point by interpreting too far. An example of this is the following feedback 11:

*“There is some sense needed in the spare part pricing. Some flexibility is needed. The telephone system should be improved. Expensive parts, at least three times the price of a multi-brand spare part sales company although the manufacturer of the part is the same. Nobody can be reached via phone, nobody calls back although they promise. They do not call back, when the call is interrupted. Apparently there is poor reception in the case company workshop, because the calls get interrupted so often.” (Feedback 11)*

This is interpreted as a complaint about spare part pricing (5). Here the complaint is also interpreted to be focused on attitude (4) and communication (6). On the other hand some feedback is really clear, for example feedback 14: *“It would be good if the customer is notified before new parts are installed in the vehicle.” (Feedback 14)* This is clearly a request for better communication (6).

According to Table 3 the five most recurring complaints for Turku are about ‘Time’, ‘Skills’, ‘Attitude’, ‘Pricing (parts)’ and ‘Communication’. When comparing these complaints to the performance of Scania Turku in the CSI survey, it is visible that the lowest scores for Scania Turku come from ‘spare part availability’ (3,46), ‘explanation of the work’ (3,49), ‘staff effort’ (3,59), ‘staff skills’ (3,59) and ‘work quality’ (3,60). Moreover, the survey questions help to see clear connections between the complaints and the dealer workshop performance between the different types of complaints. For example, ‘explanation of the work’ can be linked to complaints about ‘communication’, ‘staff effort’ can be linked to complaints about ‘attitude’ and so forth.

### 3.5 Key Problem Areas Emerging from the Analysis

As seen in Table 3, the five most recurring customer complaints were about, first, time management problems, second, complaints about unskilled staff, third, complaints about employee attitudes, fourth, complaints about pricing of the spare parts, and fifth, complaints about the communication of the dealer workshop staff. These results are highlighted in table 4 below.

Table 4. Collection of the five most recurring customer complaints

Feedback	Time	Skills	Attitude	Pricing (spares)	communication
Total	7	5	5	5	3



Table 4 is used to highlight the five most recurring customer complaints picked from the CSI survey. For this thesis, five points for improvement is a too wide area for study, therefore the problems to be addressed have to be chosen from this list. *Spare part pricing* is dismissed, due to company policy of centrally deciding spare part prices, which leaves little room for dealer workshops to work on. Next, although *time management* is the most recurring customer complaint it is ruled out. It is expected to be connected to *employee skills*, *employee attitude* and *communication*. *Employee skills* is too abstract and wide as a theme for this kind of study. Also, the complaints about *employee skills* are expected to be connected with *employee attitudes* and *communication*.

*Employee attitudes* and *communication* are aspects that can both be worked on. Moreover, the improvement of these two aspects can be expected to have an effect on time management and (subjective) employee skills also. Accordingly, the key areas causing customer dissatisfaction at the Turku workshop that are addressed further in this thesis are: employee attitude and *communication*.

### 3.6 Summary of the Findings in Key Problem Areas

The case company has an existing program for front line employee training in customer care. As mentioned, the front line employees in the case company are usually foremen and spare part sales persons. This program is designed centrally in the international headquarters in Sweden and standardised for all market areas to be the same. The training material is provided in Finnish. The customer care program, for the front line employees, consists of training classes and a customer care handbook, which also contains assignment tasks that support the classes. The progress of the training and the growth of the front line employee in customer care is monitored by self-evaluation and by evaluation through the customer service managers.

The classes are taught by the customer service managers. There are five classes where the first class is an *introduction* to the training program, the second class is about *face to face contact with customers* and the third class is about *customer contact on the phone* while the fourth class is about *handling customer feedback*. The fifth class is about the maintenance and repair *workshop visit* as a whole (from booking to follow-up). Between each class there is a training period in which the newly learned knowledge is applied on the job. (Scania 1-2014 p.6)

The *introduction* is used to explain why the customer experience is important and that front line employees may have an effect on the quality of services. In addition, the introduction explains that services deliver also feelings to the customer and the goal of the case company is to make this feeling as positive as possible, and it explains why it is important to create long lasting relationships with the customer (Scania 1-2014 p.12).

The key learnings from the class about *face to face contact* with the customer are the basics of customer contact (how to take the customer into account and how to make a positive first impression), how non-verbal communication is perceived and how to communicate clearly (how not to leave room for interpretation) (Scania 1-2014 p. 26).

The goal of the *customer contact on the phone* class is to make the frontline employee understand, that how the phone at a company is answered may be linked to profit. This class also explains, that it is important to concentrate on what is said and how it is said. Further this class gives an idea, about how positive and negative words affect the listener and why it is important to listen actively (Scania 1-2014 p. 48).

In the class about *customer feedback*, the employee should learn that there is no reason to be afraid of feedback. Instead, it is a valuable tool for self-improvement. Even though in conflict situations it is natural to wish to flee or to fight, but instead active decisions should be made to solve the problem and to improve the situation, and introducing practical tools for handling feedback (Scania 1-2014 p. 61).

The fifth class brings all the learnings together and is supposed to bring forth an understanding how *workshop visits* work and how to understand the customer in a way that enables the company to offer more value to the customer at each point of the visit. The fifth class also re-emphasizes the importance of clear communication and continuous feedback collection from employees and that customer service does not stop when the customer leaves the workshop premises but a follow up call should be made, to ensure the quality of the company's services and the satisfaction of the customer (Scania 1-2014 p. 73).

All in all, the customer care program at the case company is already emphasizing the importance of communication towards the customer. The current program is using multiple examples to underline the key learnings. The program is also well grounded in its reasons for the classes. The teachings are clearly designed for technical personnel that

is mostly less educated in communication. Attitude is handled to some extent, in these classes although it is handled through reasoning, as to why customers act in a certain way and how they expect to be treated, which is also underlined by the urge to think about own experiences in receiving customer service. This thesis will further concentrate on what kind of attitude and communication has a positive effect on customer satisfaction and further strengthens customer loyalty.

### 3.7 Focus Areas for Improvement

To recap, this thesis concentrates on the Turku dealer workshop of the case company. This specific dealer workshop was chosen because of the performance in the CSI survey, amount of data available, the size of the dealer workshop and proximity to Scania head offices.

This thesis concentrates on two problem areas that arose from the CSI data: *attitude* and *communication*. Because business improvement is an ongoing process and to ensure that the effectiveness of the corrective actions is measurable, the amount of actions is limited to these focus areas. The selected focus areas are already handled to some extent in customer care trainings that the case company provides. Therefore, the topic is further narrowed towards attitude and communication having a positive effect on customer satisfaction and customer loyalty. The next section will introduce existing knowledge about the selected areas.

## 4 Existing Knowledge on Improving Customer-Employee Communication

This section discusses existing knowledge about attitude and customer-employee communication. The themes were chosen to develop a concept for customer communication that increases customer satisfaction and generates customer loyalty in the long term. Theories about communication are often in fact discussing attitude in communication and suggested practices often include changes in attitude in addition to changes in communication practices. Therefore, the theories can be seen as applicable to customer communication and employee attitude at the same time.

First, this section argues about the significance of customer communication, then it focuses on the communication settings, comfortable for the customers. Next, the focus is on active and empathetic listening to the customer, underlining the importance of listening as a part of communication and giving suggestions on listening practices. It is followed by theory on expectation management, which elaborates on communicating promises and clarity in communication. Thereafter some concepts about personalized services are presented, giving insights about personal relations in service sales. Then the idea on continuous communication is presented, urging continuous communication with the customer. Finally, the existing knowledge is showcased in the conceptual framework displayed as a cycle of communication.

### 4.1 Significance of Customer Communication

Customers contact companies through multiple channels. One of the most important and traditional is face-to-face communication with the frontline staff. In these situations the customer satisfaction and impression about the performance of the company is directly affected by the communication style and skills of the employees. Another way of communication where the effect of communication on customer satisfaction is direct is phone calls. Meaning that what is said cannot be taken back and long pauses during these 'live' conversations are impossible. Therefore, certain communication skills are important for front line employees.

Front line employees are the faces of the companies. These are the employees that the customer comes in contact with, if he or she comes physically to the company or if the customer calls the company. They often are the representatives of the company that receive customer complaints about the products and services the companies provide.

They are also responsible for sales of these said products and services. In many cases they are the only real persons customers get in contact with while transacting with the company. This puts the frontline employee into a unique position where he or she is a 'marketer' of the company (Grönroos 2011). Accordingly, front line employees have a great impact on the customers' opinion about the service offered. Therefore, the 'live' communication of the frontline employees deserves attention from the company.

#### 4.2 Removing Barriers in Customer-Employee Communication

The communication cycle starts with the idea that customers want barrier free services, which at the same time make them feel appreciated. If the company is successful at this, it raises customer satisfaction (Merlo et al. 2014). The customers also give more feedback when this is made easy and their satisfaction is increased when they have the feeling that they are heard. Since the core of many services is solving problems of customers, it is important for service companies to get customer feedback or information about the problems, to be able to form solutions.

Customers are buying services to get a benefit for themselves. It can be argued that, customers want to share their information, to solve their particular problem and are also giving information to the company to improve the company's services, thus generating a benefit for themselves, the company and other customers (Merlo et al. 2014 p. 87). This interaction between customer and company is also one of the key prerequisites for value co-creation (Grönroos and Voima 2013 p. 139).

Value co-creation is a concept where value is generated in interaction between the company and the customer (Prahalad and Ramaswamy 2004). This concept was designed to oppose more traditional views of value creation where value depended on use of the product or service, or on the exchange of money into a product or service. It can be argued that the interaction is the source of value especially in pure service businesses. In other words, communication in services is not only important for customer satisfaction but also for value creation.

Accordingly, getting valuable information from customers about their problems requires an easy means of communication. The less complex communication between company and customer gets, the more of information from the customer can be expected (Merlo et al. 2014 p. 85). Customers are prepared to share their information, if the customer

benefits and *if the communication is made simple*. Simple communication means that the customer needs to have a no barriers to initiate communication.

Removing the barriers of communication can refer to several kinds of barriers. While for example *environmental noise barriers* and *language barriers* are fairly easy to get rid of, *interpersonal barriers* and *emotional barriers* are not as straightforward (Sanjay 2012).

*Language barriers* refer to language and dialect differences of the communication partners (Sanjay 2012 p. 14). In most business cases this is not a problem but for companies with international business this may provide some difficulties.

*Environmental noise barriers* refer to physical events affecting communication (Sanjay 2012 p.16). In companies these physical effects should be minimized, for example by interior design that silences environmental noises.

*Interpersonal barriers* are basically psychological and value differences between the sender and receiver in communication (Sanjay p. 14). This is a challenge for frontline employees. As a barrier it is impossible to remove completely, but employees with certain good interpersonal skills are less likely to have problems caused by this kind of barriers. The best way to prepare is to ensure the awareness of the employees about different kind of people.

*Emotional barriers* are direct emotions that effect the communication hailing for example from childhood or a recent experience of 'bad service' (Sanjay 2012 p. 2). 'Angry feedback' can be said to be caused by *emotional barriers*. *Emotional barriers* can be on both sides of communication, but it is in the best interest to prepare frontline employees so that they are not thrown off balance when receiving criticism from the customer. So that the employees are aware of their own emotions and try not to let them affect their communication.

People that are good at taking critical feedback are often also good listeners (Hacker 2003 p. 79). This suggests that the employees' listening skills should also be developed. This, in turn, links to the second part of the communication cycle.

### 4.3 Active Empathetic Listening

This part of the communication cycle hails from the notion that it is important to concentrate, in addition to what is said, on *how* things are said. This is referred to as *active empathetic listening* (AEL) (Comer and Drollinger 1999). According to Drollinger and Comer (2013 p.59) studies have shown that poor listening skills are one of the most recurring reasons for communication failure. Frequently people who feel that they are good communicators, are in fact just confident speakers, disregarding listening skills as part of communication completely (Drollinger and Comer 2013 p.58). It means that in addition to affecting customer satisfaction, listening style also affects information flow in communication, because information goes missing through poor listening.

Business practice offers some interesting lessons from various practical approaches. One of them, AEL, is a concept often linked to relationship selling but is a valid strategy for any communication. In AEL the listener has to concentrate on the sender's communication. The listener being the recipient of information while the sender is the sharer of information. The concentration must be on verbal and non-verbal parts of the message. The verbal part is the content of the message, or 'what' is said. The non-verbal parts are for example, tone of voice, mannerisms during talking and expressions on the sender's face, or 'how' it is said. In addition, the listener signals the sender with nods and eye contact, that the message is being received. Further emphasizing the signal and to clarify the message to himself, with specifying questions (Drollinger and Comer 2013 p.59.).

The first part of AEL is active listening. This is required when having a conversation or sharing or receiving instructions. Basically it means that the listener gives verbal or non-verbal feedback to the sender (Huhta 2007 p. 25). The second part of AEL is empathetic listening. This is considered to take place when the listener tries to catch the emotion of the sender (Huhta 2007 p. 26). This is in essence giving sympathetic comments while listening. It is particularly important, when trying to understand an angry customer's feedback.

Essentially the goal is to be a good listener. A good listener can identify factual content from information received as opposed to fictional content and has notices when being manipulated. A good listener lets the sender know that he or she has been understood, for example by commenting or summarizing (Huhta 2007 p.26).

Summing up, with the help of AEL and thus being a good listener, the listener makes sure that all the information is received from the sender, painting a clear picture of the sender's problem. At the same time the sender is left with a feeling of being listened to. This information has to be processed into a response which is handled in the next part of the communication cycle.

#### 4.4 Expectation Management

In this part of the communication cycle the core is to make sure that the customer gets at least what he or she has promised. *Overpromising* is a situation where the company's external communication talks e.g. of a delivery of service quality that is far better than something that can be achieved. Preventing overpromises is a matter of in-house communication, as to what is possible in addition to having standardised policies and procedures that all segments of the company agree upon (Zeithaml et al. 1988 p.44). In other words, all layers of employees need to know what can be delivered to the customer. This can be ensured for example by following standardized procedures.

According to Ojasalo (2001) customer expectations basically fall into three categories, *fuzzy*, *implicit* and *unrealistic expectations*. It can be argued that, the front line employee has to be able to understand the different types of expectations

*Fuzzy expectations* are customer expectations are intangible ideas of a change to be achieved through the purchase of a service. The customer wants something to change, but is not sure what or in what way. They have an idea of the core interest, but this is too vague for them to pinpoint. However if this core interest is not fulfilled the customer feels that the service was not good enough (Ojasalo 2001 p. 203).

*Implicit expectations* are unconscious expectations that are thought of as a given in the particular service. Meaning that the customer does not think about this aspect when purchasing the service or product. These expectations are often only noticed when they are not met (Ojasalo 2001 p. 203).

*Unrealistic expectations* on the other hand are either impossible or highly unlikely to be fulfilled. A caricaturized example of this would be, if a recruiting company is expected to find a 30 year old expert with 20 years of working experience The requirements in example can obviously not be met, but the customer does not know how the company's



business works so he or she might expect something that is not doable in the given timeframe for example (Ojasalo 2001 p. 203).

These expectations should be managed by the front line employee by focusing fuzzy expectations to precise expectations, revealing implicit expectations making them explicit and calibrating to realistic expectations (Ojasalo 2001 figure 1 on p. 206). The benefit of this kind of expectation management is long term quality that leads to long term customer relationships (Ojasalo 2001 p. 210).

Summarizing, at first the customer expectations are to be investigated and then the promise of service is communicated to the customer. It is essential to communicate the promise in a way that leaves no room for interpretation by the customer. Forming the message the sender has to take into account who the recipient is. Then he has to decide the medium to use for communication. If words are to be used these must be clear and precise. Still, due to people coming from different backgrounds, misunderstanding is possible (Lear et al. 2015 p. 67). These difficulties suggest that to communicate effectively the sender should have all possible background information about the listener. This way the message can be formed in clear terms and personalized to the listener. The following part of the communication cycle goes more into detail about that.

#### 4.5 Personalizing Service

This part of the communication cycle builds for a large part on relationship selling theory. In the notion of Relationship selling, at least one of the participants of a transaction is considerate about the specific needs of the other participant (Brennan et al. 2003). Relationship selling requires the seller to know the customer personally (Homburg et al. 2011), which makes the communication again easier as previously mentioned.

Especially in connection with strong branding, a relationship approach in sales increases customer loyalty. Whereas, a functional approach may even have a lowering effect on customer loyalty in connection with a strong brand (Homburg et al. 2011 Fig. 3 on p.806). Relationship selling, in fact, can be seen as adapting service to the customer in question. In other words, the sales person chooses a communication style fitting the customer.

According to Grönroos (2011), the technical outcome has as much impact on the perceived quality of services as the attitudes, behaviours of the company employees or accessibility of the service. However, communication style has also been identified as the key element of customer satisfaction (Webster and Sundaram 2009). There is a notion that different communication styles have a different effect on customer satisfaction. Often times a friendly style of communication has the most positive effect on customer satisfaction. This further emphasizes the importance of the relationship between sales person and customer.

Using relationships to add value is a concept according to which the customers perceive increased value if they are comfortable with their relationship to the salesperson. This emerges from the feeling of having a dependable partner if problems occur (Manning et al. 2010 p. 54). This calls again for empathetic skills to be able to step into the shoes of the other person and to be able to communicate this effectively. Essentially in relationship sales it is important to communicate to the customer that his or her satisfaction is the primary aim (Manning et al. 2010 p. 59).

Having a familiar relationship with the customer also expands the customer's tolerance for errors and provides the company with a valuable communication channel for customer insight regarding the handling of possible problems (Parasuraman 1991 p. 46). Revealing another benefit for the company, gained through familiar relationships between employees and customers.

If the sales person and the customer have a personal relationship and are able to conduct business in a friendly style, the customer can be expected to be more loyal and satisfied (Vesterinen 2016). This again can be connected to the further part of the communication cycle.

#### 4.6 Continuous Communication

Trust is developed to long term loyalty through social bonds and continuous communication. In other words, trust itself hails from a certain level of intimacy between the sales person and the customer. Without this intimacy, trust is also beneficial but it does not develop to long lasting loyalty (Ponder et al. 2016 p. 82). Further, the level of trust determines the readiness of communication and relationship building for the customer (Ponder et al. 2016 p. 83). Keeping up communication is among the factors that impact the

customers view of the relationship quality (Parsons 2002 p. 10). Suggesting that loyal customers are gained through long lasting relationships based on familiarity.

This also urges to keep in touch with the customer after transactions, to make sure they are happy with the service received and that given promises are kept. This is often referred to as a follow-up (Moncrief and Marshall 2005 p.15). The follow-up can be done via multiple media, for example on the phone or over e-mail. The primary goal of the follow-up, in this concept, is to deepen the relationship between employee and customer, and so to ease the following interactions. In addition to this, it gives an opportunity to track customer satisfaction through routine questions on the phone. This is due to either strengthening the good impression made through success, or due to having an early start on removing possible problems (Manning et al. 2010).

There is no reason however, to leave communication only to the follow-up; on the contrary continuing communication is encouraged to further develop a friendly relationship with the customer. Through frequent contact with customers, also conflict situations can be reduced. Just communication is not enough for customers, as they also want to be communicated with in a consistent frequency (Rutherford et al. 2012 p. 167). Frequent high quality communication has also been identified as an important element of inter Firm relationship (Leszczynski and Zielinski 2013 p.127). Making conflict avoidance and interfirm relationship further reasons for continuous communication.

Linking this back to the first part of the communication cycle, customers who are on friendly terms with the sales person have the feeling that communication is easy for them and they are comfortable sharing information.

#### 4.7 Conceptual Framework

Business practice and literature discussed in this section suggest that customer communication in service companies can be seen as a cycle. Customers come to the company with a problem, they communicate it to the employees at the front desk. These employees gather information and form a solution to the problem. This solution is then communicated to the customer. This whole interaction starts to familiarize the two parties. Long term customers are bound to return to the same employees at the front desk which completes the cycle. Suggesting that customer communication is a repetitious cycle and

that the employees have therefore a possibility to deepen the relationship to the customer with every turn of the cycle.

This deepening of the relationship in the cycles should be used to increase customer satisfaction and customer loyalty. This concept of customer communication as a cycle, and how it can lead to greater customer satisfaction and loyalty, is visible in Figure 4 below.

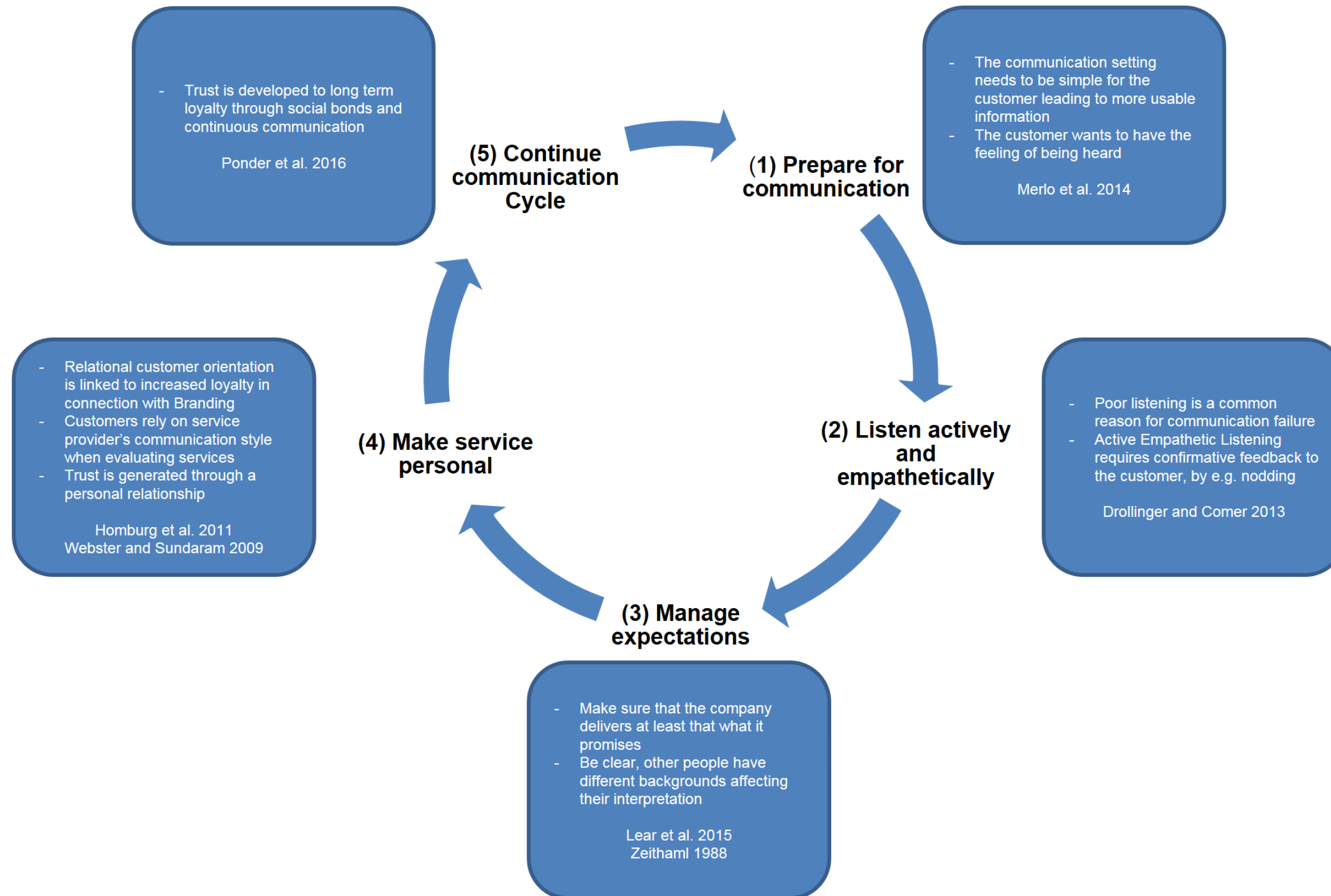


Figure 4. Conceptual framework for improving communication through establishing a continuous communication cycle.

The cycle starts with *preparing for communication (1)*, by being easily approachable as an employee. This means that the customer has an uncomplicated way to start interaction with the company. The front line employee has to be mindful about possible barriers of communication, so that possible negative feedback from the customer does not affect the communication style of the front line employee. Right at the start of this interaction the employee needs to prepare to truly listen to the customer. This ensures a pleasant and simple start of the interaction which encourages further interaction with the company.

Then the employee *listens actively and empathetically (2)* to the customer. This means that the employee concentrates only on the customer, taking note of what is said and how it was said. During listening the employee gives nods and specifying questions to signal that he is listening and to gather more information. This way the customer feels appreciated and provides more information. This in turn is also the foundation of the technical success of the service.

The employee formulates a response to the customer, in a way that is clear to understand and communicates a promise that the company can keep, thus *managing the customer's expectations (3)*. This means, that the employee has to be mindful of what can be promised, what the customer expects from the service and how this should be communicated to the individual customer. This way the customer is well informed about the possibilities of the service. Meaning that the customer's expectations are fulfillable.

The aim is to provide the customer with *personalized service (4)*, to encourage a personal relationship between employee and customer. Suggesting that the employee should seek a friendly intimate bond to the customer, to be able to adapt the communication style in a way that suits the customer. This kind of interaction is linked to increased customer satisfaction. Personal relationships with customers also rises the tolerance for possible errors.

When *continuing communication (5)* the relationship is expected to deepen and to lead to a loyal satisfied customer. This urges to keep in mind that communication should be continued after the service transaction, to ensure that the customer is happy with the company and to pave way for new interaction with the customer. Frequent communication is expected by customers and it also helps to avoid conflict with customers.

Of course in service companies, loyal customers are expected to have a reason to take initiative in communication again, then the employee should again be *prepared (1)* for that. On the second (and further) turns of the cycle, the customer is already familiar with the employee making success in all the parts of the cycle a little easier.

All parts of the cycle are aimed to increase customer satisfaction and loyalty. These benefits are achieved by giving a professional and familiar impression on one hand and on other hand by using communication to gather crucial information, which secures the functionality of the service. Accordingly communication has a positive effect on customer satisfaction in two ways: satisfaction through *communication style* and satisfaction *through functionality* of the service.

## 5 Building Communication Guide Proposal

Communication as a cycle is used as a concept in designing the interview questions to key stakeholders inside and outside of the company. The goal is to get empirical feedback from the field as support to form a communication guide for customer-front line employee communication. After an overview of the process, this section introduces the individual parts of the proposal and introduces at the end the initial proposal of a communication guide.

### 5.1 Overview of Proposal Building Stage

Key stakeholders from outside and inside the company are interviewed to get their feedback about the problem areas. Key stakeholders for this project include a customer, dealer workshop front line employees and the customer service manager of the dealer workshop. The customer has an overview about what is wrong or how it seems on the outside. The dealer workshop employees have insight about why it is wrong or the reasons of current performance.

The customer service manager on the other hand, is an expert in customer contact and has as a supervisor an idea of the current performance of the employees. Therefore, he has also insight on how this dealer workshop employees reacts to improvement suggestions and how the dealer workshop employees can be motivated.

This interview data is used to design a communication guide on customer-front line employee communication. The goal is to have a presentable communication guide for the key stakeholders which they are comfortable to execute and confident that it will bring desired change.

The communication guide is designed by using the *best practices* and *knowledge*, and linking it with the *experiences* and *insights* of the employees, while keeping the *key problem areas* in mind. The parts of the communication cycle are used as the basis for 'commandments' in the guide and these are explained through suggestions from practical experiences, to make them more approachable and intuitive. All parts of the guide are designed in a way that improves the two chosen problem areas: *attitude* and *communication*. The ultimate goal is increasing customer satisfaction and loyalty.



## 5.2 Prepare for Communication

According to the theories introduced in the previous stage, customers are more inclined to give information if communication is made easy and customer satisfaction is higher, when the customer feels him or herself appreciated. The basis of preparing for communication is having an open and approachable attitude as an employee and having someone available for communication as a company.

This openness and readiness can be demonstrated by following these 'commandments': *get to know the customer's business (1), give the customer an easy communication channel (2), remember to treat all customers the same (3), on the phone make sure that the customer knows who you are (4), and keep on having someone on the front desk available (5).*

In *Getting to know the customer's business (1)*, the idea is that the customer is more comfortable to share his or her problem when he or she notices that the front line employee is interested and cares about the problem. This is demonstrated by showing interest in the business of the customer. For the employee to be able to solve the customer's problem, insights about the core business are also needed. This was especially highlighted by the customer service manager (Interview 1).

*Give the customer an easy communication channel (2)* means that, external noise barriers should be reduced to a minimum in the customer areas and that an employee should be always available when the customer wants to initiate contact. For the employees the first part means that they should keep the customer area quiet enough for conversation. The second part means that telephones and emails should be monitored for possible customer contact, and these should be answered in a timely manner. This gives the customer the feeling that the company is easily reached.

*Remember to treat all customers the same (3)* should be self-explanatory. Customer companies have multiple agents that seek the services of the company. According to the customer (Interview 2), who is the owner of the company, his employees (drivers) are not treated the same as himself. Sometimes drivers of the customer company are not getting service appointments on a short notice, but if the customer himself contacts the company, after the driver was refused an appointment on short notice, the service appointment is available for him on same notice. This kind of behaviour can cause emotional or even interpersonal barriers, because the information about unequal treatment

of customer company employees will circulate in the customer company. Therefore, these problems can be avoided by making sure that all customer agents from all customer companies are treated equally. That is basically a question of attitude adjustment.

*On the phone make sure that the customer knows who you are (4)*, as a commandment is also a basic commandment for customer service. However, this came up because the front line employees are all in the same phone ring and if the customer calls multiple times in a short period he may reach each time a different person (Front line employee 3, Workshop 2). Meaning, that when the front line of the company is called and no direct number is dialled the call goes to the first available front line employee. The calls are connected equally so that, if the customer calls directly after a phone call for a second time, he or she is likely to be connected to a different front line employee than first time. Therefore, on the phone should always be clearly communicated, who is talking.

*Keep on having someone at the front desk (5)*. Availability of front line employees at the desk, was mentioned as a differentiating factor of the company in comparison to competitors (Customer, Interview 2). This is a good practice and should be kept up. Basically this means, that there is always someone who greets the customer and inquires about the reason for the visit, to provide the customer with the needed expertise service, either by him or herself or by getting another employee to the front desk.

By following these five 'commandments' the customer has an easy way of contacting the company. The customer has also the feeling of being noticed and therefore prepared to give the information regarding his or her problem. The feeling of being noticed is enhanced through listening.

### 5.3 Listen Actively and Empathetically

The theoretical background here, is that lack of listening skills is one of the most common causes for communication failure and in addition to getting more information, by listening the 'right way' customer satisfaction can be affected positively. By being a good listener the employer has also the capability to identify true information from false. This leads to the suggestions to use *active empathetic listening (1)*, *concentrating on getting the information right (2)* and *making sure the information is written down (3)*, or in other words available for use in back-office.

Active empathetic listening should be used to *understand the customer complaint better* (1) and to give the customer the feeling of being listened to. The complaint is better understood by getting more information through specifying questions during the customer contact and by concentrating only on the customer.

Getting all the information is especially important, because *getting the complaint wrong leads to doing the wrong things* (2) (Customer service manager, Interview 1). It is important to *get the information written down* (3). The information flow inside the company is like a 'game of telephone' (Customer service manager, interview 1). The distortion of information during communication is illustrated by Figure 5.

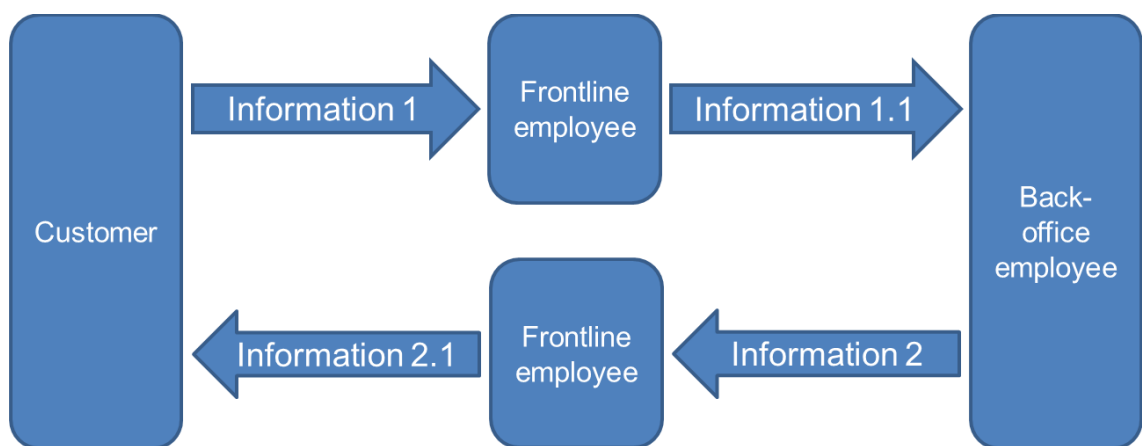


Figure 5. Information flow in the case company in customer service

In the case company the **Information 1** about the problem comes from the customer to the front line employee and from the front line employee the **information 1.1** is communicated to the back-office employee. Afterwards the back-office employee communicates the **information 2** about the solution to the front line employee, whom then communicates the **information 2.1** to the customer.

The frontline employee gets **information 1** from the customer. This is usually a complaint about the product, which should be repaired in the back office. The information does not flow instantaneously to the back office. Instead it is stored for a while and then enhanced with other relevant information, from the IT system for example. This becomes **information 1.1**. In most cases the solution to the customer problem is defined by the back office employee, so it is important that the information, about the customer problem included in **information 1.1**, is exactly the same as in **information 1**. If the information is

written down the content stays the same, but if it is left in memory and given orally to the back-office employee information is nearly certainly changed.

Then the **information 2** about the solution is communicated to the front line employee. **Information 2** builds on **information 1.1** and the actions of the back-office employee. The idea of **information 2** is to communicate the solution to the customer. Here again information is stored before it is communicated. There is rarely a possibility for the Back office employee to communicate instantaneously the solution after completion of the work to the front line employee. Also, the front line employee can be a different front line employee than the one in the first information exchange. So basically there is a possibility that the Back office employee has to communicate both, **information 1.1** and **information 2**, to the front line employee. This front line employee again enhances the information, e.g. with information from the IT system. And again there is a high risk of having to wait before giving **information 2.1** to the customer.

Every time a person has to store information and/or enhance it, there is a high risk of information being distorted. Therefore, it is advisable to write information down, exactly the way it was said and not to start interpreting it beforehand. Having the right information makes expectation management possible.

#### 5.4 Manage Expectations

Theory suggests that the customer should be made sure to have a clear understanding about what is promised. For the case company this means standardizing the customer service. This requires that front line employees are able to communicate the promise clearly, to identify the customer's expectations and if needed to be able to adjust these expectations. This can be ensured by *delivering (at least) what was promised (1), being clear when communicating (2)* and by *giving all information available to the customer (3)*.

*Delivering at least what has been promised (1)* is not only taking care about the functional quality of the service but also making sure that the promise has been communicated the right way and that all employees are clear about what the promise is. The customer service manager said (Interview 1): "Many times when I get complaints it is about little things. One time one customer on the phone was really aggressive when calling and it turned out that he was charged six euros for a knit cap when it was advertised for 5 euros

apiece.” The price is not the issue, but the breach of promise is. The company had promised that the cap costs a certain amount and advertised it openly. Of course the customer feels betrayed when the promised price is not honored. Although in this case the price was small, but if the same thing happened with a more important issue the outrage would have catastrophic effect on customer satisfaction. The single customer could even convince other customers to take their business elsewhere. Therefore, the customer promise for each case has to be clear to all front line employees and should be written down.

*Being clear when communicating (2)*, reminds the front line employee to take the background of the customer into account when communicating. The intention is for the front line employee to communicate in such a way that leaves no room for interpretation. For this to be successful, the front line employee needs to set his or her words in a way that is common enough and therefore the meanings of the word are established but specific enough to be able to give sufficient detail.

*Giving all information to the customer (3)*, comes from the idea that the customer deserves to know the whole process of the service visit (Customer service manager, Interview 1). This means that not only the outcome of the visit should be communicated, but also how the solution was reached. This again requires a certain attitude and standardized process in how the solution process is written down.

These elements make sure that the customer has a clear view, what was promised and what was done to solve his or her problem. This is also the grounding for the next part, personalizing service.

## 5.5 Make Service Personal

Here the idea is for the front line employee to get familiar with the customer. According to theory this has a positive effect on customer satisfaction and loyalty. *This has been also recognised by all the stakeholders (1)*, this can be achieved by getting to know the customer by *chatting for five minutes (2)*, *this way can also be evaluated how additional services should be sold to the customer (3)* and it is important to keep in mind that *when the customer evaluates the service he is evaluating the employee communication (4)* (providing the service was technically successful).

All key stakeholders that were interviewed or participated to workshops agreed that *familiarity between front line employees and customers makes service situations easier for both parties (1)*. This is a fact that highlights the urgency of the theoretical background of relationship selling used in the theory section. The front line employees had the feeling that the customers trust them instantaneously. With other words they saw that if the customer initiates contact with the company, the customer trusts the company.

To get familiar with the customer it is advisable to *chat for five minutes with the customer (2)* to get a feeling what kind of communication style is the most suitable for the individual customer (Front line employee 3, Workshop 2). This practice allows the employee to have a friendly conversation with customers making the service experience more pleasant for both. Accordingly, the front line employees should be encouraged to befriend the customers.

By having a familiar relationship with the customer, *the front line employees may evaluate how the customers desire additional services to be sold to them (3)*. The nature of the company's service business often reveals additional points during the service, where the customer would benefit of additional services. The front line employees have recognized that different types of customer want these services to be sold to them in different ways. "Some customers want a phone call, some customers want a detailed email and some customers want to do business face to face" (Front line employee 4, Workshop 2). If the customer and employee are familiar enough these additional services can be sold without contact, which eases the business process.

*Evaluation of service is evaluating the communication of the front line employee (4)*, providing the service was functionally successful. This is a reminder of the importance of communication style. There have been some events in the company, where the service was functionally perfect but one employee has said the wrong thing at the wrong time. Leading to the situation that the customer got what he paid for but is still unhappy with the purchase. This is a reminder for the front line employees to be tactful, even when talking with customers they are on friendly basis with. The customer is still a customer and deserves therefore certain respect. Forgetting this may even lead to losing long-time customers.

By realizing the benefit of getting familiar with the customer and so using relationship sales tactics, the front line employees are able to generate trust in customers. This trust is evolved into long term loyalty in the next part.

## 5.6 Continue Communication Cycle

Theory suggests, that trust of customers is good for companies but it can be short lived, however trust can be evolved to long term loyalty by intimate relationships between customers and employees. To achieve this the following suggestions should be kept in mind: *continue communication (1)*, *make follow-up calls (2)*, *follow up on the CSI* and keep in mind that “*trust demands success*” (3) (Front line employee 2, Workshop 1).

*Continuing communication (1)* is the foundation for relationship building. If relationship sales tactics are to be used the befriending should come as naturally as possible. Relationships cannot be forced but they can be nurtured and encouraged by continuous communication.

A good way for keeping up communication is *making follow up calls (2)*. “Basically if I have any feeling that maybe I should call the customer, I will call the customer (Frontline employee 4, Workshop 2). On one hand this gives the customer the feeling that the company cares and on the other hand this gives the company the possibility to tackle problems early on. According to the front line employee 4 (Workshop 2) there are some customers that just love to be called. They appreciate the care and are interested in forming relationships with the front line employees. It is not possible to befriend everybody, but idea is for the front line employees to recognize these customers that do want to be familiar and keep in touch with them.

*Trust demands success (3)* (Front line employee 2, Workshop 1), means that even with superb communication the company has to deliver successfully what it has promised. The functional success of the service has to be taken care of. This again needs internal communication and gathering the right information, to be able to do the right things. On the other hand, *trust demands success* means also that when building a relationship with the customer some expectations to the relationship are born at the same time. These expectations have to be met, to be able to have a relationship to the customer.

Continuing the communication cycle brings the customer and front line employee closer together, this also rises expectations. The expectations are put to the test when the customer has a new problem, which means that the front line employee has to prepare for communication.

## 5.7 Proposal Draft

The previously introduced 'commandments'. Were crafted by combining insights of the company employees and one customer, with the insights from available knowledge. The result is a cycle with five main points in the communication cycle and minor supportive points to give hints as to what this main point means and how it can be put to practice. The communication 'commandments' are collected into a similar figure as the conceptual framework (Figure 6).



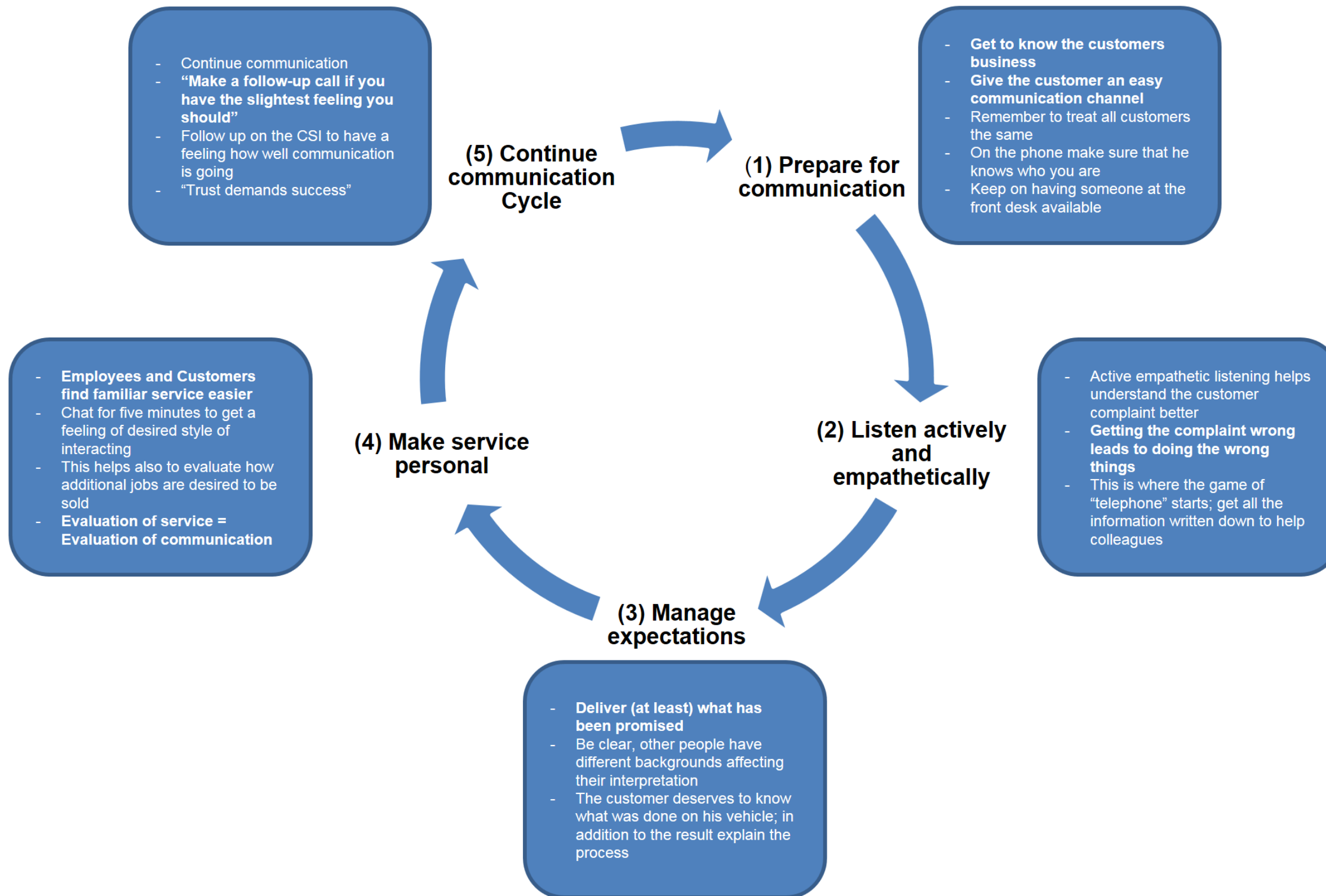


Figure 6.

Draft of the communication guide proposal.

The idea of the communication guide proposal in Figure 6 is, that the front line employees should be *prepared for communication* (1). The front line employees should listen *actively and empathetically* (2) when engaged in communication. When replying to the customer during communication this should be done in a way that *manages the customer's expectations* (3). Communication should be personalized to the individual customer, what again *makes service personal* (4). The front line employees should be aware of communication being a cycle and they should be prepared to *continue this cycle* (5), to use it in their advantage.

A printed version is handed out to all the front line employees. This guide should be kept at the desk on a prominent place. On one hand it would be a reminder when communicating with customers, on the other hand it would be also easily internalized due to constant exposure to it. In addition the text from subsections 5.1 to 5.6 should be printed as booklet to give the reasoning behind these commandments. Both documents have to be translated into Finnish.

This communication cycle is introduced to the stakeholders from the company, to evaluate its fit to the company. This evaluation is introduced in the next section.

## 6 Validation of Proposal

This section describes the validation process of the initial version of the communication guide. A trial run in this kind of case is not an easy option as time is limited, so the validation is made in three presentations followed by a feedback interview session. Due to the intangibility of the subject, the validation is also rather intangible and dependent on the opinions of the interviewees. This process yields a validation for the case that is not the strongest possible.

### 6.1 Overview of Validation Stage

For validation three key stakeholders are chosen to give feedback. They are front line employee 1, the customer service manager of the dealer workshop and the process improvement manager of the case company. Each key stakeholder is given an individual presentation. For the frontline employee, the content is limited to a Finnish version of the conceptual framework and the initial communication guide. For the customer service manager and the process improvement manager the presentation content is in English, consisting of the key points that are in this thesis, from choosing the dealer workshop to the initial proposal. After the proposal presentation each key stakeholder is asked for opinion about the proposal in an unstructured manner.

All key stakeholders saw the proposal as a suitable communication guide. The customer service manager commented (Interview 3): 'It made me instantaneously think: are we following these guidelines?' The key stakeholders had varying ideas for the use. Frontline employee 1 (Interview 4) saw it as a suitable tool for initiating training of new employees, this would come in handy especially before new employees are able to join the customer care training. The process improvement manager (Interview 5) said: 'We have always said, that we would be better off, if we knew our customer's business (better)'.

As the feedback on the initial proposal is mainly positive, there are no suggestions to change the actual content or message of the communication guide. The suggestions refer more to choice of words and additions to the supportive points. These suggestions are introduced for each part in the communication guide and in the end the Final proposal is shown with the changes highlighted.

## 6.2 Developments to Proposal Based on Key Stakeholder Feedback

Four of the five parts in the communication cycle has changes in it. These are elaborated in the following subsections.

### 6.2.1 Changes in 'Prepare for Communication'

The wording of the first suggestion of this part was changed from 'get to know your customer's business' to '*be aware of the customer's business*'. This came from the feedback of front line employee 1 (Interview 4). The idea itself is reasonable but the situations on the front desk are usually not suitable for this kind of inquiries. Also the IT program that is used has this kind of information available. Therefore, the wording *be aware* is much more suitable.

The suggestions 'Give the customer an easy communication channel' and 'keep on having someone at the front desk' were merged to one suggestion, '*Make sure someone is easily available to the customer*'. This was the suggestion of the process improvement manager (Interview 5). This makes the list more compact and the wording 'give an easy communication channel' was confusing. It could have been understood as an order to generate a new way of communication. The initial intention of both points is still represented in this combination, while being clearer.

'Remember to treat all customers the same' was changed to 'Remember to treat all the customers *equally*'. This was a suggestion of the process improvement manager (Interview 5). The change makes the text more professional without changing the message.

### 6.2.2 Changes in 'Listen Actively and Empathetically'

'Active empathetic listening helps understand the customer complaint better' was changed to 'Active empathetic listening helps to understand the customer *feedback* better'. This change was suggested by the process improvement manager (Interview 5). 'Complaint' is a negative word. Negative words are to be avoided in customer communication (Scania 2-2014 p69-71). Having a negative word constantly in front of the front line employee might affect the communication unintentionally. In addition 'feedback' is a more appropriate word, because it is more general than 'complaint'. Not all customer-front line employee communication is complaining.

'Getting the complaint wrong leads to doing wrong things' was changed to 'Understanding feedback wrong leads to doing wrong things'. This change was suggested by the process improvement manager (Interview 5). Getting was changed to understanding, because the wording is more professional this way. Here the change from complaint to feedback was for the same reason as previously.

The added suggestion 'read back the notes to the customer' was a wish of the customer service manager (interview 3). This was added to make sure that the front line employee also checks that all the information is written down and understood correctly.

### 6.2.3 Changes in 'Manage Expectations'

'Be clear, other people have different backgrounds affecting their interpretation' had the word '*presuppositions*' added. It now reads 'Be clear, other people have different backgrounds and *presuppositions* affecting their interpretation'. This was suggested by the process improvement manager (Interview 5). The new wording links to the emotional barriers introduced in the conceptual framework. The new wording also is more descriptive for differences in people in comparison to just backgrounds.

'The customer deserves to know what was done on his or her vehicle; in addition to the result explain the process' now reads 'The customer deserves to know what was done *and what was not done* on his or her vehicle; in addition to the result explain the process'. This new wording was suggested by the process improvement manager (Interview 5). The intention is to emphasize that the customer needs to also know if something on the vehicle was found that was not yet fixed. This new wording also encourages sharing more information.

### 6.2.4 Changes in 'Make Service Personal'

The Suggestion 'This helps also to evaluate how additional jobs are desired to be sold' was rephrased to 'This helps determine how to sell additional jobs'. This idea is from customer service manager (Interview 3). The point is that there is no reason for guessing or evaluating, the customer can just be asked this at this point.

### 6.3 Summary of Final Proposal

The final proposal follows the same pattern as the conceptual framework and the initial proposal. The additions and modifications to the proposal, undertaken on the basis of feedback, are highlighted in yellow. The final proposal for the communication guide can be seen in Figure 7 below.

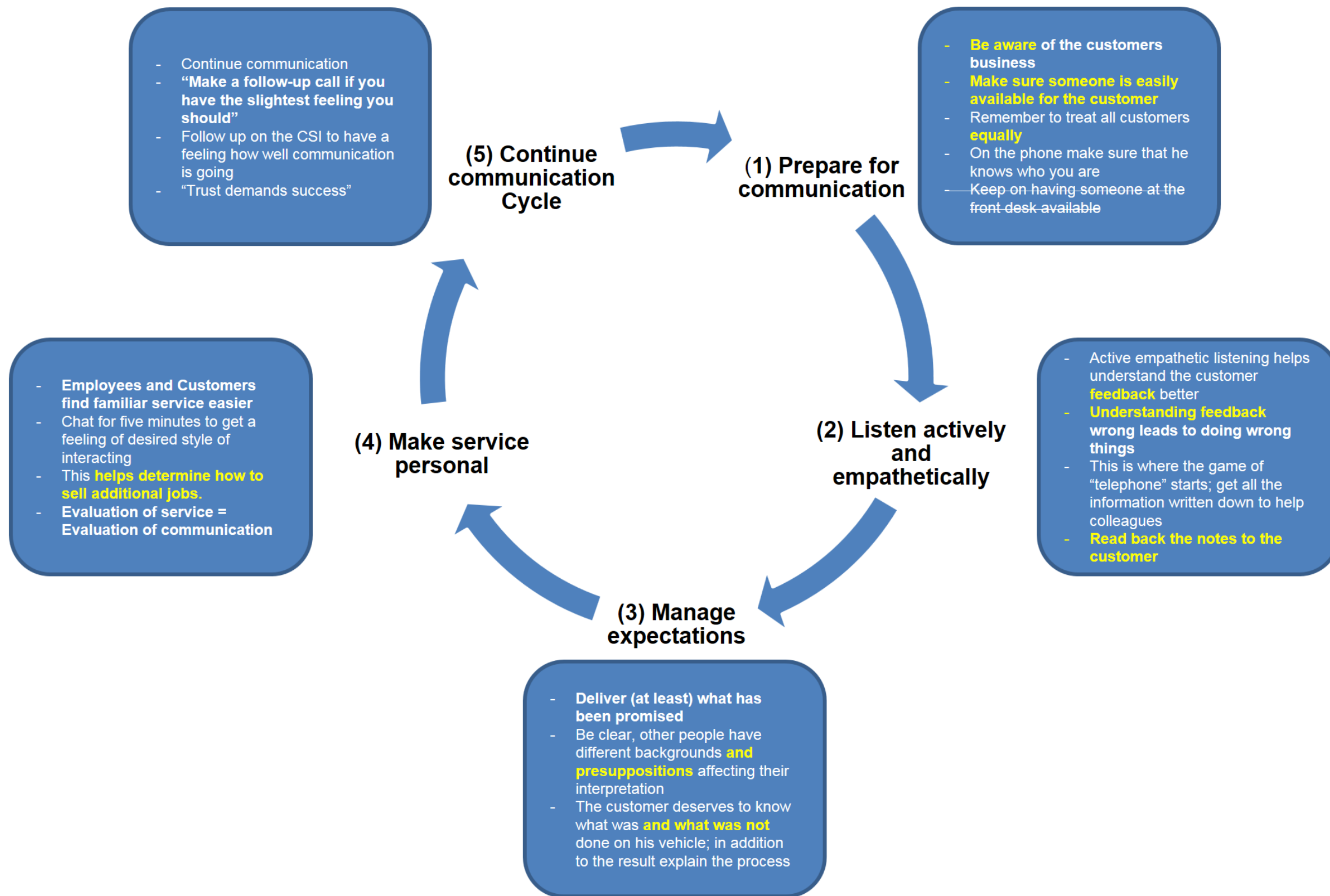


Figure 7. Final communication guide proposal.

The suggestion for use for this communication guide is that it is handed out with the booklet explaining the reasoning, as a printed version to all the front line employees. This guide should be kept at the desk on a prominent place. On the one hand, it would be a reminder when communicating with customers, on the other hand, it would also be easily internalized due to constant exposure to it.

#### 6.4 Recommendations for Implementation of the Communication Guide

This communication guide should then be used as a basis for follow up training of the customer care training. Considering, the interviewed front line employees requested follow up training in communication. The training would improve the customer service capabilities of the front line employees and thereby the customer satisfaction, which would make the company more competitive.

The training would be a one-day training where each of the parts of the communication cycle would be handled in separate sessions. The 'trainer' introduces in each session the topic at first broadly, by writing a heading, '*Prepare for communication*' for example, on a whiteboard. The 'trainer' being the customer service manager. Then the 'trainer' encourages conversation, and collects suggestions and experiences of the 'trainees', i.e. the front line employees. After these suggestions and experiences have been collected, the 'trainer' then explains the theory of the heading on hand of the booklet. At the end of each session, the suggestions of the communication cycle are rewritten, according to the 'trainees' experiences, at the same time keeping the theory in mind. This way the suggestions come from the personal experiences of the front line employees and are therefore better internalized and the theory is understood better.

The next section will evaluate this thesis. It will also give some recommendations, on how to further improve customer satisfaction assurance in the company.



## 7 Conclusions

This section summarizes the thesis. After that, it gives suggestions for future actions in the company. In the end, this section evaluates this thesis.

### 7.1 Executive Summary

The objective of this thesis was to propose a communication guide for customer-front line employee communication. The aim was to propose the communication guide to improve the customer - front line employee communication and thus positively influence the customer satisfaction in the case company. Service quality is the competitive edge of the case company in service sales. The quality of the service can be measured through customer satisfaction. Therefore, customer satisfaction is one of the metrics for the competitiveness of the case company.

In the current state analysis, with the help of the available customer satisfaction index (CSI) survey data, the key problems causing customer dissatisfaction were determined, and from these, two aspects were chosen as the focus area to be studied. They related to the behaviour of the front line employees with the customers and pointed to the *attitude* and *communication* of the front line employees. After that, the current practices in the case company were investigated in order to improve attitude and communication.

The results of the current state analysis were used as a basis for literature review, which was resulted in the conceptual framework. This framework showcases the critical elements as steps to improve the customer - front line employee communication with the intention to improve customer satisfaction and customer loyalty. This theory was then used as basis for key stakeholder interviews and building the proposal for the communication guide that was constructed with the ideas from literature and interviews in mind. The initial communication guide was introduced to the key stakeholders for validation and feedback, and based on the feedback the final communication guide was created.

The proposal suggests that the communication starts by *Preparing* for it. The front line employee then *Listens* actively and empathetically to the customer problem, aiming to get a clear picture of the problem. After that the front line employee prepares to *Reply* in a clear way that leaves no room for interpretation and *Giving a promise* that the company is able to fulfil. At this point, the front line employee starts to develop a *Relationship*

according to relationship sales tactics. Thereafter, the front line employee takes care of this relationship by *Keeping in contact* with the customer.

## 7.2 Next Steps and Recommendations to the Case Company

The first step suggested to the case company is that there should be a plan on how the CSI survey data at the other dealer workshops could be used to improve the performance of the other dealer workshops. This thesis should be used as a guide to ease the process. This would make use of already available data and turn it into improved customer satisfaction. Conducting the process would be the task for customer service managers of the dealer workshops.

The second step suggested is that the front line employees should start following up on the CSI. This was included in the final communication guide and also a request by the interviewees. A plan should be made how this valuable customer feedback can be communicated effectively by the managers to the front line employees. The benefit would be more committed front line employees. If they have access to the metrics, they also start to consider it. This is a task for the customer service managers of the dealer workshops.

The third step suggested is improving the customer satisfaction survey. The amount of questions asked at the moment is too high. Fewer questions would give a higher response rate. A higher response rate would give more data and thereby a more accurate picture of the current situation, which again enables more specifically targeted improvement actions. This should be investigated by the process improvement manager.

However if the change of the survey is impossible, the change of the procedure of sending the surveys should be re-evaluated. At the moment there is a waiting period used to avoid spamming the customer with e-mails. On the other hand, some valid feedback may be lost this way, for example if it turns out later on that the vehicle was not fixed during the first visit, this would distort one key number the case company's headquarters in Sweden is following. This kind of scenario might also lead to negative feedback going unnoticed, e.g. if the customer has to return without expecting it he is not likely to appreciate it. This critical feedback is the kind of feedback that is often most valuable. Therefore the possibility of dropping this quarantine time should be investigated, or a system

where another questionnaire goes to the customer if there is a return visit for the same problem.

### 7.3 Thesis Evaluation

This thesis created the improvement based on the identified key problem areas and proposed the guideline to the communication between the front line employees and customers. The findings from the study pointed to challenges in this area, which led to proposal building and making plans based on measurable business performance data and multiple workshops in the case company. The objective was to propose a communication guide to customer-front line employee communication, and it was also the outcome.

This sub-section also evaluates how successfully the thesis was carried out according the four quality research criteria, discussed separately below.

For research to be of high quality, there are multiple criteria according to which it can be evaluated. For this thesis there are four criteria chosen, *logic*, *relevance*, *validity* and *reliability*. These four points are fulfilled with each step of this research process.

*Logic* means that the reasoning is used to distinguish valid inferences from invalid ones, and this way making sure the result is sound (Business Dictionary 2017). It means that the decisions and assumptions have a solid reasoned grounding. In this study, logic is ensured by using factual evidence from real experiences or available referred knowledge as grounding for decisions and suggestions. The research plan was followed throughout the whole process. This was possible because the research plan was really straightforward.

*Relevance* in research means that the research is interesting, applicable and current. In addition, it should be written in a generalizing way (IGI Global 2007). In this study, relevance is ensured by choosing a topic that is interesting for the case company, but is at the same time general enough to apply to virtually any service business. Also the case is handled in a general way, so that no key point is dependent on the case company or the business area of the case company. Further the problem of communication and attitude in modern service companies an urgent one, to make sure that the solution also is current the literature used for this thesis should be under ten years old.

*Validity* means that the descriptions, conclusions, and interpretations are credible and correct (Maxwell 1996 According to Huhta 2011). A fundamental test for validity is, if the research is actually an answer to the initial problem (Quinton and Smallbone 2006 p. 127). Another way of testing validity, is testing for external validity, which means that all decisions and suggestions are backed up by theory. (Yin 2003 p. 34-39).

In this study, validity is ensured by ensuring the initial research problem is answered and that all suggestions have theoretical evidences as grounding. As for external validity, the communication guide proposal was constructed entirely from stakeholder feedback and available knowledge. This thesis was successful in that aspect. However, there should have been more stakeholders heard in the validation phase. The intention was to have a larger number of feedback sessions, but it was not possible due to lack of time.

Additionally, to strengthen validity, if this research is repeated in the future, the interview questions could be formulated in a different way, due to different problem areas identified from the current state results. This difference in key problem areas causing customer dissatisfaction could also, in effect, lead to a different conceptual framework. The basic research process itself, however, does not necessarily change, even if the interview questions and the expected outcome may change. If customer feedback is used as starting point for research, the key stakeholders are likely to be the same as in this research: customers, frontline employees with regular customer contact, and the supervisor(s) of these employees. One demand for the guide was that it will increase customer satisfaction. This is not yet measurable, but the reasoning of the suggestions for communication was backed up by theories that concentrate in customer satisfaction and loyalty. This means that the objective and outcome are at least to some extent in line.

*Reliability* means that the outcome of the process would be identical if the research was to be repeated (Quinton and Smallbone 2006 p. 105). One way of measuring the reliability is making sure that the research plan is followed from problem to proposal (Yin 2003 p. 105). The other criteria relates to the reliability of data collection. These two indicators are taken as measurements for the reliability of this research.

Regarding the reliability of data collection in this study, the collection of customer feedback through the CSI survey relies on the e-mail addresses gathered by the company. At the moment, not every customer has an e-mail address in their contacts of the IT

system. Approximately 30 % of the customer companies are not getting CSI surveys through the system at the moment. Further, not all e-mail addresses in the system belong to customer company representatives that have personal contact with the company. Some of the available addresses belong to financial officers for example or CEOs that only govern the customer company. In addition to this, the survey was responded only by 20 % of the recipients of the survey. This means that many customer companies are not heard at all. Therefore, if this kind of research is to be repeated the survey type should be reconsidered. As mentioned in the recommendations, a shorter survey might yield more answers from the customer companies. Also telephone surveying might be considered.

Additionally, to strengthen reliability, if this study is repeated in the future and no CSI questionnaire data for the company in question are available, this data can be substituted by interviewing selected customers. Also, if there is CSI data available, but the amount of qualitative feedback is insufficient for conclusion about the key problems, customer interviews are advisable. For this present study, the benefit would be to conduct a larger customer feedback survey, to obtain a large sample of customer responses. The main message and outcome would still be the same, but for example the communication cycle might concentrate on different issues in communication. Also if given more time, the next researcher might be able to get a more thorough feedback round for the initial proposal, or possibly a pilot run for the initial proposal. So the final proposal might be better validated.

Finally, if this research is repeated, a pilot test for the communication guide is advised instead of a validation session with feedback, to produce the final version of the proposal.

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## Data 2 Field Notes

Workshop 1, 12.4.2017 68min 9:15 start 10:23 stop

Workshop attendants:

Front Line Employee 1, Service Workshop Foreman (has attended the customer care training)

Front Line Employee 2, Spare part sales person (has attended the customer care training)

Supporting person present:

Process Improvement Manager

In the beginning the process improvement manager explains the CSI and the researcher follows up with why this research is undertaken. this took about 10 min.

Questions:

1. In which kind of cases do you have to call the customer usually again (after the vehicle has been left for service)?
2. What kind of successful means for communication are in use (that not necessarily all of you use yet)?
3. In what kind of ways/situations have you noticed that information goes missing?
4. In what ways does communication differ with customers you are better acquainted with in comparison to customers that are newer or less known to you?
5. In what situations or circumstances do you have the feeling that the customer trusts you (or the company)?
6. What kind of difference in customer trust have you noticed between customers you are better acquainted with in comparison to customers that are newer or less known to you?
7. Is there enough managerial leadership regarding information flow?
8. Is there a need for additional communication training? What kind?

1

- sometimes the customers have to be reminded that there are some spare parts waiting for them (after the initial call)
- If the customer's spare parts are late
- when the job is ready
- additional work found on vehicle that was not scheduled (OK if this is done call)
- if jobs are running late
- if the job needs to be moved due to lack of parts or mechanic falling ill

2

- The service workshop foremen communicate with each other also in their spare time (over whatsapp for example)
- Communication is divided into numerous different means of communication

3

- If there is a great amount of information (over the phone or in a conversation) and the phone rings again before everything is written down
- The information seems to go lost between the sparepart department and the service department
- there was talk about silos or that it is somewhat learned behavior

4

- it is easier to be un-flexible (strict) when needed if the customer is not a good acquaintance
- working with better acquainted customers is more flexible
- with better acquainted customers you try harder
- sometimes a better acquainted customer is forced in the schedule instead of telling him that there is no time available at the moment
- all in all the attendants have noticed that work / communication is easier with better acquainted customers

5

- You hear it from their voice and you see it in their eyes (they mostly do not say it aloud)
- Tricky cases
- Calls when stranded on the road
- Every service made
- Trust demands successes

6

7 &amp; 8

- What means of communication to use when, to make sure information is transferred
- a more distinct meeting culture with the whole team, with a agenda known in advance so the team can prepare for the meeting, for example the same meeting twice so that frontline is not un occupied
- A weekly meeting with frontline employees and the customer service manager
- Meetings of foremen and spare part sales together
- Some training would be needed (hard to say specifically)
- Some guidelines needed on what information needs to be actively broadcasted on the workplace and what information is nice to know information

Workshop 2, 12.4.2017 47min 14:19 start 15:06 stop

Workshop attendants:

Front line employee 1, Service Workshop Foreman (has attended the customer care training)

Front line employee 2, Spare part sales person (has attended the customer care training)

Supporting person present:

Process Improvement Manager

In the beginning the researcher explains why he is here and the process improvement manager elaborates the CSI system

Questions:

1. In which kind of cases do you have to call the customer usually again (after the vehicle has been left for service)?
2. What kind of successful means for communication are in use (that not necessarily all of you use yet)?
3. In what kind of ways/situations have you noticed that information goes missing?
4. In what ways does communication differ with customers you are better acquainted with in comparison to customers that are newer or less known to you?
5. In what situations or circumstances do you have the feeling that the customer trusts you (or the company)?
6. What kind of difference in customer trust have you noticed between customers you are better acquainted with in comparison to customers that are newer or less known to you?
7. Is there enough managerial leadership regarding information flow?
8. Is there a need for additional communication training? What kind?

1

- regarding lager repair jobs
- If the customer is very precise, or if I know that the customer loves to be called
- Basically if I have any feeling that maybe I should call him I will call him
- if some compromises have to be made on the schedule
- I make a callback if I was unsure the repair fixed the vehicle
- If we have repaired the same fault more than one time in a short period I make a call-back to make sure it is fixed
- If we had a reclamation I usually check-up if the vehicle has worked

2

- internal emails (the technicians are here somewhat not in the loop)
- More meetings (in a way that does not leave the front line unoccupied)
- The most critical information needs to be on the bulletin board (in addition to being said in meetings)
- For information flow with the customer you need to know the customer and what he appreciates. Some want to meet face to face, some want to talk on the phone and some want everything in their email (to have written proof)
- "it does not matter what the repair or service costs, as long I am treated right"

3

- "telephone" game
- the silos talk only inside
- too long "stories" the message is not always concentrating only on information but may include a comical relief etcetera
- If the vehicle needs a larger / longer overhaul sometimes the deadline of the job is forgotten to communicate internally
- also in larger / longer jobs the customer is not always kept on the run of things; although it would be good for him to know about progress
- sometimes it happens that there is so many additional jobs found and the initial description is so slim that the original reason for the service visit is forgotten to take care of
- A customer may call three times in fifteen minutes but, he does not realize being connected to a different foreman each time resulting in a puzzle
- Some customers want a phone call, some customers want a detailed email and some customers want to do business face to face

4

- For better acquainted customers may confidently let all the additional jobs found be made
- A better acquainted customer can easier be compromised with if the workshop is sold out
- A new customer is tricky and I need to map out the boundaries: how much can additional jobs be done before consulting the customer, does the customer allow drivers to freely decide over additional jobs or do these have to go through the owner or the fleet manager
- "after 5 minutes of talking with a customer I know if the customer is pursuing service or savings" (service is smoother with less points of contact, if there is a urge to run everything by the owner because of monetary issues, the points of contact are increased and service is slowed down)

5

- If the customer just calls and says that we do what is necessary if we find additional jobs. this signals to me that the customer trusts that we keep the vehicle in peak condition and we do not do unnecessary services, or we do not sell any jobs that are not needed
- If the customer just says that we know best what needs to be done

6

- Better acquainted customers trusts the work being done fast, in high quality and for the right price and does not put every repair out to tender (does not feel the need to compare prices between us and the competition)
- new customers tend to question everything
- older trusting customers do not question anything
- the difference between new and better acquainted customers is that, the situations tend to be lighter with older customers and I may talk about other stuff than the jobs to be done

7 &amp; 8

- there is a need for 5 minute instant meetings (do not have to be scheduled but structured)
- It would be nice to get information from the national HKV group meetings (HKV = huolto, korjaus ja varaosat = service, repairs and spare parts often also called aftersales)
- We would like to hear more customer feedback
- We would like the CSI questionnaire answers gone through as a team
- We need a regular weekly meeting
- regularity brings...
- With the technicians there is at the moment only the work distribution meeting, but something else might also be good
- information flow is relying on persons
- Additional or refreshing customer care training
- Customer care training for technicians, there have been cases where the customer was treated well and with respect in the front line, but when he gets in contact with the technician, the technician may say something and ruining the service experience with one sentence

Interview 1, 12.4.2017 35min 10:45 start 11:20 stop

Interviewee:

Customer service manager

1. In which kind of cases do you have to call the customer usually again (after the vehicle has been left for service)?
2. What kind of successful means for communication are in use (that not necessarily all of you use yet)?
3. In what kind of ways/situations have you noticed that information goes missing?
4. In what ways does communication differ with customers you are better acquainted with in comparison to customers that are newer or less known to you?
5. In what situations or circumstances do you have the feeling that the customer trusts you (or the company)?
6. What kind of difference in customer trust have you noticed between customers you are better acquainted with in comparison to customers that are newer or less known to you?
7. Do you feel that you provide enough managerial leadership regarding information flow?
8. Is there a need for additional communication training? What kind
  - The Customer service manager has noticed that sometimes the initially collected information is not enough if the responsible foreman is changed during the work being done on the vehicle
  - There has been general feedback from the employees that they want more (managerial) information that affects their work
  - For making sure that enough information of the cases is collected each monitor has a list of key questions (if all questions can be answered the amount of information is sufficient)
  - Difference in amount of written text (some understand from less)
  - Information goes missing if there is a phone call and you are located so that you cannot write everything down, after which you proceed to your desk and are confronted by other tasks on your way, so when you eventually arrive at your desk the information is forgotten
  - There are preparations of an app (trello) being used for information transfer (this app might be a good solution for the previous point)
  - Working with better acquainted customers is more natural
  - be aware of differences between how customers want to be communicated with
  - Many times when I get complaints it is about little things. One time one customer on the phone was really aggressive when calling and it turned out that he was charged six euros for a knit cap when it was advertised for 5 euros apiece
  - If a customer is unknown it is best to get to know the customer's business first
  - If you know the customer's business it helps you a long way

- The customer complaint has to be understood thoroughly, if not you end up doing wrong things
- The employees need/want more information but this has to be communicated well, the employees tend to take everything black and white
- The customer deserves to know in what condition his vehicle is in. What was done on it
- The customer communication needs to be clear and for this we need clear information, about what was done and why, even or especially in cases we were not able to reproduce the fault, the customer needs an explanation of how we tried to repair the vehicle This highlights the importance of information flow inside the company we need the description of the process not only the result
- A great portion of the GPTW feedback was about information flow
- The information comes from the customer to the front line employee and goes to the back office (technician) and comes back to the front line employee. Some of the information comes from the customer, some from the front line employee and some from the technician. It is like a game of 'telephone'

Interview 2, 12.4.2017 16min 12:38 start 12:54 stop

Interviewee:

Customer

1. In what kind of cases are you called by Scania, after leaving your vehicle for the service?
2. What kind of information have you the feeling is forgotten to be told to you by Scania?
3. In what ways does communication differ with Scania employees known to you compared to new ones?
4. When do you have the feeling that your trust towards Scania increases?
4. When do you have the feeling that your trust towards Scania decreases?
5. Is there a difference in your trust towards Scania when served by Scania employees known to you compared to new ones?
6. How could Scania improve their communication towards you?

- the main problem seems to be that the drivers are treated differently than himself. the drivers are not getting appointments on tight schedules, but he does. This is an inconvenience for him and he feels sorry for the drivers because they feel offended due not being taken seriously
- all in all, all frontline employees are polite and skilled
- Here it is newer like at the competitor, where four guys are sitting around and you try to fetch something, no one there notices you. But here at your place, if the foreman is not at the desk the spare part sales person asks what he can do for me
- Main difference between old and new employees is that the new ones know how to overbook the workshop in a way that every service gets done. the older do not overpromise
- a notice of what was done in the service would be nice additional communication



### Data 3 Field Notes

Interview 3, 24.4.2017

Interviewee:

Customer Service Manager

- Telling who you are on the phone is a good point. You could also tell your direct number if you know the customer needs to call back
- Read back to the customer, what you have written down. This way you know you have understood it correctly
- You can simply ask the customer, how additional jobs are sold, you do not have to 'evaluate' it.
- It (communication guide) made me instantaneously think: are we following the guidelines?
- This was my gut feeling

Interview 4, 24.4.2017

Interviewee:

Front Line Employee 1

- The person adding the customer to the IT system should take care, that the business of the customer is also mentioned
- To pry this information about customer business is often not possible at the front line
- This is guide is a good reminder
- This would be a good tool for training new employees

Interview 5, 25.4.2017

Interviewee:

Process Improvement manager

- We have always said, that we would be better off, if we knew our customer's business (better)
- The customers have been divided in segments, but that information is used poorly
- Communication channel sounds a bit confusing
- The same is unprofessional, could it be equally
- be approachable and make sure that you can be gotten hold of
- Complaint sounds negative, could it be feedback instead
- right first time on time
- The customer deserves to know what was done and what was not done
- Could you add presumptions to backgrounds, it would communicate more clearly where the difference comes from