

Service futures: What is expected from customer care?

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Abstract

Customer care is a critical aspect of service provision. A customer-centric approach to the design of services depends on knowledge of customers' preferences and expectations for customer care. In this paper, we present a study on customers' near future expectations for customer care within selected service sectors. As part of a future scenario process, 151 participants contributed their perspectives on customer care for banking, telecom, and logistic services. The study findings highlight expectations concerning service value and service experience, and shed light on preferences for self-service vs. manual care. Furthermore, we find that, though the participants expressed a marked preference for service providers that add a positive experiential aspect to their customer care, the studied service sectors were not closely associated with experiential customer care. Consequently, the experiential aspects of customer care may represent an unrealized potential in these sectors.

KEYWORDS: Customer insight, customer care, service design, future services

Introduction

Excellent customer care is a hallmark of the customer-centric service provider (Cook, 2011). Customer care takes place in the interactions between the customer and the service provider, where the latter is represented through front-line employees or self-service channels, and depends on the service provider's empathic understanding of the customers' needs and expectations (Gorry & Westbrook, 2011). The quality of customer care is seen as critical for customer experience (Frow & Payne, 2007), customer retention (Cook, 2011) and for generating positive word of mouth (Gremler, Gwinner & Brown, 2001). Designing excellent customer care depends on a thorough understanding of customers' preferences and expectations, to facilitate service performance that is equal to or above these expectations (Cook, 2011).

To support service providers and designers in their efforts to facilitate excellent customer care, we present a study of customers' preferences and near future expectations for customer care in three important service sectors: banking, telecom, and logistics; all of these sectors are in the process of transforming towards servicizing (Baines, Lightfoot, Benedettini & Kay, 2009) their product portfolio.

In this study, we analyze customers' preferences and expectations according to Polaine, Løvlie, and Reason's (2013) distinction of service performance in terms of *service value*, which concerns objectively measurable service delivery relative to service cost, and *service experience*, which concerns the customer's subjective perception of the service. This distinction parallels other

frameworks that may be used to explore service performance, such as that of *service value* and *satisfaction* in the field of service research (Cronin, Brady & Hult, 2000) and *effectiveness* and *efficiency* vs. *satisfaction* in the field of human-centric design (Maguire, 2001). We chose the framework of Polaine et al. (2013) to ground our findings specifically in the field of service design.

The study contributes insight that is of relevance for the design of near future services in these service areas. It also contributes to our general knowledge of customer preferences and expectations for near future customer care.

Background

Customer care

Customer care is understood as customer service provided on the basis of a thorough understanding of customer needs and preferences (Gorry & Westbrook, 2011). Critical aspects of customer care, studied in the fields of service research and service design, include interpersonal relationships between customers and employees (Gremler et al., 2001), perceived characteristics of self-service solutions that lead to customer satisfaction and dissatisfaction (Meuter, Ostrom, Roundtree & Bitner, 2000) and the importance of the right clues provided by the service provider to build the desired customer experience (Berry, Carbone & Haeckel, 2002). The customer-centric organization needed for excellent customer care has been studied from, among others, the perspective of moments of truth (Carlzon, 1989), critical incidents (Meuter et al., 2000), and experiential service provision (Zomerdijk & Voss, 2010).

The service value of customer care

The value of customer care may concern objectively measurable outcomes such as efficiency, availability, and cost. Efficiency concerns the correctness and timeliness of service delivery and is closely associated with the structure of the back-stage processes of the service provider (Zomerdijk & Voss, 2010). The efficiency of service performance is also closely related to ease of use, in particular for self-service alternatives, where the usability of such alternatives may determine perceived service performance (Meuter et al., 2000). Availability concerns the how and when of service provision. Online self-service may indeed improve service availability, following the credo of 24/7 (Gorry & Westbrook, 2011). However, companies that provide self-service solutions only to achieve cost reduction may easily end in what Polaine et al. (2013) refers to as a "race to the bottom" (p. 2) where the customer-centricity perspective is lost along the way. Though cost is important to customers, other differentiators are needed to counter such a race to the bottom.

The service experience of customer care

The experiential outcomes of customer care may of course depend on the measurable outcomes of a service, but other aspects are also of importance. In their work on experiential services, Zomerdijk & Voss (2010) discuss how well-designed services may generate positive emotional responses in customers which, in turn, drive purchase, loyalty, and word-of-mouth. For this purpose, they highlight the importance of designing series of service encounters and clues, engaging with customers through front-line employees, designing a dramatic structure to services, and being aware of the sensory experience involved in the physical environment. Cook (2011) and Polaine et al. (2013) discuss how experience may depend on expectations; a

positive experience is generated when the service delivery surpasses the customers' expectations, whereas service delivery below expectation generates a negative experience.

The experiential performance of customer care may also depend on the competency and flexibility of the service provider. Competence concerns the ability of the service provider to advise and guide, and may be reflected both through front-line employees and self-service solutions (Gorry & Westbrook, 2011). Flexibility concerns service aspects such as customization (Holmlid, 2009) and personalization (Lee & Park, 2009), including the freedom to choose between self-service and manually served channels (Gorry & Westbrook, 2011).

Research objective

Many innovations in experiential services are driven by detailed insight of customers (Voss & Zomerdijk, 2007). The aim of this study is to provide customer insight that may be useful in the practical design of future customer care, and that may serve as a general contribution to the scientific field of service design. Such insight serves as a needed complement to trend report and foresight studies (such as James, 2011; Watson, 2011), which, typically, are based on contributions from leading service managers rather than direct customer involvement. To focus the gathered customer insight, we see it as beneficial to target near future services.

The research objective of this study is therefore to explore customer preferences and expectations for customer care in near future services.

Because the study was situated in the context of a research project concerning three particular service sectors, that is, banking, telecom, and logistics, the study findings mainly concern these sectors. However, the centrality of these sectors in current and near future service provision should make this selection of sectors of high general interest.

Method

To gather exploratory customer insight, we needed to engage customers in open-ended reports on their preferences and expectations to produce findings that were not foreseen prior to the study.

Polaine et al. (2013) distinguish between quantitative *market research*, where the objective is to reach a small number of objective findings on the basis of quantitative data from large amounts of customers, and qualitative *insight research*, where the objective is to generate a large number of insights on the basis of qualitative data from a small number of customers. Such small sample insight research may be exemplified by the observational studies of the empathic design tradition (Leonard & Rayport, 1997).

We wanted to explore customer preferences and experiences on the basis of an insight research approach, while improving the robustness of our findings by involving a somewhat larger number of customers than what is typically done in insight research. Our solution to this method challenge was to employ an online social platform for gathering customer insight, where customers were invited to contribute their insights as free text comments in response to a small number of pre-set topics. All customer comments were made available to all participants, and study participants and moderators alike could reply to, or 'like', any contribution made by others. The online social platform was originally established for user involvement in Living Lab

innovation processes (Følstad, 2008) and has previously been used for customer feedback in service innovation (Følstad, Fjuk & Karahasanovic, 2012).

The participants were recruited as a sample from an online marketing panel consisting of more than 50.000 individuals who were representative of the Norwegian population. Norway is arguably a suitable location for insight research by means of online social platforms due to relatively high levels of computer literacy and Internet penetration. To ensure the participants' interest in writing free text and engaging in online dialogue, we invited from the panel only those that stated agreement on two initial questions concerning their preference for expressing themselves in writing and their interest in debate.

In January 2013 the participants were asked to contribute in four study tasks. Task 1 concerned excellent customer care independent of service sector; Task 2–4 concerned expectations for near future customer care in the three service sectors of the study.

- » *Task 1: Examples of excellent customer care.* As a warm-up task, we asked our participants to contribute examples of excellent customer care from any sector. This was done to start with a topic that was very concrete and that invited participants to make engaged and detailed comments. This introductory topic also served the purpose of gaining insight in customers' immediate associations with excellent customer care, which could then be compared with the preferences and expectations concerning the three subsequent topics.
- » *Task 2–4: Expectations for customer care in near future banking (Task 2), telecom (Task 3), or logistics services (Task 4).* The participants were briefly reminded of the tremendous changes we have witnessed over the last few years in the given service sector. For example, in Task 2, they were reminded of how banking services have moved from physical banking offices to web-based and mobile platforms. The participants were then instructed to think four years ahead, to the year 2017, share their customer care expectations, and suggest what needs to be changed.

To stimulate conversation, the participants were notified by email if anyone replied to their comments and invited to return to the online platform by means of a direct link to the topic in question. Two study moderators (the first and fourth author of this paper), monitored the participants contributions and made replies with follow-up questions, acknowledgements of valuable contributions, or, on a small number of occasions, challenges for controversial contributions. From previous studies, we know that such active moderation could improve the usefulness of the participants' contributions (Følstad, Hornbæk, & Ulleberg, 2013).

To explore customer preferences and expectations, we conducted thematic and content analyses of all answers (Ezzy, 2002). Firstly, we read through the answers in an open-minded manner, to identify themes within the data set. To allow for comparison of preferences and expectations, we established one set of themes to reflect the participants' answers for all four tasks. Secondly, two researchers coded the replies according to the emerging themes. The seven most prominent themes are presented as customer care preferences in Table 1. Interrater reliability was obtained through pilot coding (Cohen's *kappa* ranging between 0.6 and 0.7 for the themes of Table 1), indicating substantial agreement (Landis & Koch, 1977).

Results

A total of 151 participants contributed with comments in our study. The participants were divided nicely across gender (51% female) and spanned ages 21 to 80 years (mean age was 45 years). The participants contributed 555 comments across the four study topics. Comment length averaged 333 characters. Findings from our analyses of the material are presented below in terms of preferences and expectations respectively.

Preferences for customer care (Task 1)

The study participants' examples of excellent customer care, contributed in Task 1, provided interesting insights into a wide range of customer preferences. The preferences we identified may be grouped according to the distinction between service value and service experience made by Polaine et al. (2013). For a quick overview, the customer care preferences listed by the participants are grouped according to this distinction in Table 1.

Service performance types	Identified customer care preferences
Service value	Efficiency / availability
	Cost
	Ease of use
Service experience	Friendliness
	Benevolence
	Competence
	Flexibility

Table 1: The participants' customer care preferences mapped onto the service performance types of Polaine et al. (2013)

Service value was strongly associated with the efficiency and availability of customer care; in fact, nearly half (48%) of the Task 1 participant comments concerned such preferences. As stated by one of the participants:

"In my eyes, customer care should be to the point, speedy, and efficient. Nothing is worse than having to go through four departments to get an answer while the service personnel try to sell you other services."

However, several of the participants noted that efficiency should not compromise the willingness and ability of customer care personnel to understand the customer. Efficiency is expected, but not seen as incompatible with mindful customer care.

Not surprisingly, the participants highlighted a desire not to be kept waiting for customer care. However, when waiting occurs, excellent customer care requires that the service provider acknowledges the customer and reassures that she has not been forgotten.

"I find it to be good customer care when the customer is seen. For example, if a waiter, who is busy, gives you an eye and signals that he has seen you and will come to your table as soon as possible, this is very good."

Some of the participants also discussed the importance of expectation setting and noted that their perceptions of customer care may depend on such expectations.

"[...] The airline Ryanair has managed the small masterpiece of lowering our expectations. [...] I would not call the customer care of Ryanair particularly good, but I assume it is good customer care when you get as expected or what?"

Very few of the Task 1 comments (3%) concerned cost and ease of use. When asked about memorable examples of customer care, the participants clearly tended to focus on service values related to efficiency and availability rather than cost and ease of use.

Service experience was equally important as service value in the participants' examples of excellent customer care. The most frequently mentioned aspect of service experience was what we term *benevolence*. We defined benevolence as customer care that reflects in the service provider a propensity to have the customers' best interests at heart. In Task 1, one-third

(33%) of the participant comments concerned examples of customer care that appear to reflect benevolence in the service provider.

The prevalence of benevolence in the participants' examples of excellent customer care is highly interesting, in particular as it represents a marked opposition to service providers seeking to maximize short-term profit. In these examples, the participants showed their preference for service providers who act in a manner that reflects a long-term interest in their customers' wellbeing. Such acts of benevolence are presented as particularly indicative of excellent customer care when they hold a short-term cost for the service provider.

"Without us having complained, we were called by [our broadband provider] with a notification that they would compensate poor signal quality by a reduction in the oncoming invoice – this is what I think of as delivering above expectation – totally unexpected and highly confidence-inspiring."

Friendliness is another aspect of service experience that was markedly present in the examples of excellent customer care, mentioned in 32% of the Task 1 comments. *Friendliness* refers to customer care conducted in a pleasant, courteous, positive, trustworthy, and not too pushy manner. Several respondents noted that a lack in friendliness might be detrimental to the customer care experience.

Service provider competence was also highlighted as important to excellent customer care, mentioned in 14% of the proffered customer care examples. Though competence arguably can be important also in self-service contexts, the participants mainly addressed competence in the context of manual customer care.

"My search for new mountain boots ended at [a retail store] where I experienced both competence and good service. Sales personnel that radiate trustworthiness are my favorites. Then I buy."

Service flexibility was not mentioned in any of the examples of customer care. Clearly, our participants associated more closely excellent customer care with experiential aspects such as benevolence, friendliness, and competence rather than flexibility.

Near future expectations (Task 2-4)

In Task 2–4, the participants provided their expectations for customer care in the near future of banking, telecom, and logistic services. We applied the same set of themes for Task 2-4 as for Task 1. This made it possible to identify differences between customers' general preferences and their near future expectations for customer care in these three sectors.

Service value was strongly prevalent also for the participants' expectations concerning customer care. Across all three sectors, the aspect of efficiency and availability was by far the most prominent service expectation, reflected in 53% of the Task 2–4 participant comments. Efficiency expectations concerned response time, timeliness in delivery, and robust recovery from error. Availability expectations concerned working hours for manual service and physical location of offices or pick-up points.

Ease of use was somewhat more prominent in the customer care expectations of Task 2–4 than in the examples of excellent customer care in Task 1. In particular, the participants highlighted an expectation of easy-to-use self-service for online banking. It seems as if the importance of ease of use was readily present in the minds of the participants for sectors where they have had substantial experience in self-service solutions.

"[...] if I should make a wish for the future, it would be a simpler user interface for online banking. I often have problems in navigating, and which money that have/ should/ ought to be moved between which account [...]"

Cost was also somewhat more prominent for customer care expectations expressed in Task 2–4, in particular for logistics services, than was the case for the examples in Task 1.

Service experience in the comments for Task 2–4 mainly concerned competency and flexibility (mentioned in 28% of the Task 2-4 comments) in service provision rather than friendliness and benevolence (mentioned in 14% of these comments). This is strikingly different from the service experience aspects associated with excellent customer care in Task 1.

The prominence of competency as a customer care expectation was found across all the studied service sectors. The participants expressed an expectation both to be met with knowledge and for this knowledge to be used for advice rather than as part of marketing or sales initiatives. This use of knowledge was argued to increase customers' trust. Some highlighted the need to improve the training of frontline personnel to meet heightened competency demands.

"[...] in the future (as many of the services will be self-service) it will be important that the provider is accessible and that customer care personnel has thorough knowledge in their fields (invoice, technical, network, subscriptions, etc). [...]"

Flexibility was also a somewhat prominent customer care expectation across all the studied sectors. For telecom providers, participants highlighted a need for flexibility both in terms of channels for customer care and in terms of personally configurable service bundles. For logistic services, participants discussed flexibility in terms of choice in pick-up points as well as choice between self-service and manual customer care. This latter aspect of flexibility was also a particularly noteworthy customer care expectation in the banking sector.

"To me an online bank, and in particular a mobile bank, has become an important tool that resolves problems with opening hours, etc. I hope that these are continually improved. At the same time, I hope that advisors will still be available to help if one feels lost among all the products of a bank."

The balance between self-service and manual service in customer care seemed to be one of the more engaging issues for the participants and generated some emotionally charged discussion. In particular, participants disagreed about whether manual customer care was to be expected as a free option. Proponents of free manual customer care argued that such service is sufficiently beneficial to the customers' experience to be a justifiable cost for the service provider, as expressed in the following comment:

"@anon1: I am happy that your family is good with data. I am afraid not all are as good [...]. I think I would like to see the advisor in person when I am about to take up a loan [...]"

Conversely, opponents argued that manual customer care should be seen as a cost to be reduced as much as possible and reserved for premium customers, as expressed below:

"@anon2: Nothing is for free. For me, banks may have a lot of manned offices, personal customer care, [...], but I am not willing to pay the cost for this. [...]"

Interestingly, benevolence and friendliness in customer care were far less present in the participants' near future expectations for the given sectors than they were in their examples of excellent customer care. However, we may still learn something concerning the importance of benevolence and friendliness from the participants' expectations.

In the banking and telecom sectors, some near future expectations concerned products, subscriptions, and services being better fit to the actual needs of the customer, as opposed to being fit mainly to the revenue models of the bank or telecom provider. Such near future expectations arguably are associated with a wish for service providers in these sectors to make it clearer that they have their customers' best interest at heart. As one participant stated, when considering the telecom sector:

"Good customer care from the telecom operator would be to get help to find the right subscription plan based on one's own actual use, and not having to change operators to get the lowest price. This should be the operator's responsibility."

For banking and logistic services, some pointed out the importance of friendliness in the personal meeting between the customer and the frontline personnel.

"[...] a bank which cares and shows interest in my life situation, this is the bank I want."

Discussion

In her book on customer care, Cook (2011) states, "We have become a service economy. Yet few organizations are truly delighting their customers" (p. 1). The findings from our study provide some insight concerning customers' customer care preferences and near future expectations in key service sectors. In the following sections, we will discuss our findings in terms of their implications for (a) service providers and practical service design and (b) the scientific discipline of service design.

Implications for service providers and practical service design

The presented study findings hold several implications for service providers and practical service design. In the following, we will discuss three.

Firstly, excellent customer care requires attention to a range of aspects concerning both service value and service experience, something that is in line with the current state of the art (Cook, 2011; Polaine et al., 2013; Stickdorn & Schneider, 2011). Though efficiency is highly appreciated in customer care, the participants also expressed appreciation for the experiential aspects of service provision. Friendliness and benevolence, that is, having the customer's best interest at heart, are important in the personal meeting between customers and frontline personnel; these aspects also need to be addressed when improving the efficiency of customer care (Gorry & Westbrook, 2011). Furthermore, such experiential aspects can also be important in self-service solutions; an interesting service design challenge will be to transfer the friendliness and benevolence that is desired in manual customer care to self-service solutions.

Secondly, though experiential aspects such as friendliness and benevolence in service providers are highlighted in the examples of excellent customer care, the same aspects are nowhere near as prevalent in the customer care expectations for banking, telecom, and logistics services. Hence, we suggest that these service sectors may represent an opportunity for service designers in the future to augment these services with other experiential aspects than what are currently expected by customers, in particular by strengthening the impression of customer care as friendly and benevolent.

Thirdly, though we found that flexibility, cost, and ease of use were widely expected for near future banking, telecom, and logistics services, these aspects were not prevalent in the examples of excellent customer care expressed by participants in Task 1. Possibly, future service designers should work to raise customers' attention to the importance of some of these aspects, in particular flexibility; that is, to clarify for the customers the benefits they are offered by flexible customer service. In particular, the choice between self-service and manual customer care, or a combination of the two, may currently be underplayed as a service benefit.

Implications for the scientific discipline of service design

Our exploratory approach to customer care preferences and expectations gave us some new insights concerning what matters to customers. While the literature provides ample insight concerning the importance of experiential aspects in service design (Zomerdijk & Voss, 2010) and customer care (Gorry & Westbrook, 2011; Gremler et al., 2001), as well as how to achieve a positive customer experience (Cook, 2011; Polaine et al., 2013; Stickdorn & Schneider, 2011), less is written on the actual experiences that we want customers to have.

In this study, we established a set of concepts to analyse our data, presented in Table 1. While some of these concepts are well-established, such as *efficiency*, *availability*, and *competence*, others are less familiar, in particular the concept of *benevolence*. To understand the experiential needs and desires of customers, we may need to expand our technical vocabulary to be able to precisely point out and design for the experiences that we want to evoke in the customer.

We do not argue that the presented set of concepts is complete or adequate for understanding customer experience across service contexts. However, we believe that for such sets of concepts to be available in practical service design they need to be established within the science of service design. Possibly, our methodological approach of gathering customer insight through an online social platform may represent an interesting middle way, between what Polaine et al. (2013) discuss as insight research and market research, to establish such concepts for customers' experiences. In this approach, some of the in-depth character of, for example, the observational studies of empathic design is traded for the robustness of market research.

Conclusion

We have presented the findings from a study on customer preferences and near future expectations for customer care. We have discussed how the study findings may have both practical and scientific implications. Our study has its limitations; in particular, we focused on one single country and three service sectors. In consequence, the generality of the findings may be limited to service contexts that are sufficiently similar to those of this study. Nevertheless, our findings provide relevant insight for both practitioners and researchers in service design. We hope that this study motivates researchers to further explore customers' expectations and preferences for customer care and customer experience in service design.

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