



## **Towards more customer-centric marketing of training courses**

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## Abstract

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<p>The thesis explores ways to make an organization's marketing more attractive and customer-focused. The thesis focuses on ways to align marketing, especially the content of marketing messages, with the views and interests of customers. For this purpose, the thesis uses a specific course as a case study and examines how well customers' perceptions are aligned with the marketing messages used to market the course.</p> <p>The study approaches the topic as a case study. The topic is first examined through an analysis of existing customer feedback and then through semi-structured interviews conducted with course participants. After that a content analysis of the marketing materials related to the course are analyzed. Finally, comparison between the results of the analyses is done to assess how well the marketing content matches the actual perceptions of the customers.</p> <p>The main results of the customer feedback analysis and interviews show that customers value especially the practical applicability of the course, the comprehensive content and the expertise of the trainers as well as the opportunity to gain and share insights with other participants. However, there is room for improvement. Dissatisfaction with the linguistic inconsistencies and limitations of the materials in relation to the distance delivery of the course were identified. Increasing interactivity, modernizing the training materials and tailoring the content to different professional roles, among other things, would improve the course and customer experience.</p> <p>The analysis of the marketing materials shows that the content related to customer experience and promotion is moderately aligned. Marketing materials emphasize technical aspects such as the course structure and the specific skills to be taught on the course, but little emphasis is placed on delivery methods, instructor expertise and interactive qualities, for example. The study highlights the importance of customer-centered marketing, balancing the technical and functional dimensions. The paper concludes with suggestions for improvement, such as the creation of enriched message content, the use of visual tools to convey value and the updating of course content.</p> <p>The thesis concludes with concrete recommendations to make marketing more attractive and distinctive. Among other things, recommendations include making content more consistent with the visual identity and improving the process of collecting and analyzing of feedback. Further research is suggested to find ways to develop the customer feedback process and refine internal marketing practices to ensure that the quality of service matches external promises.</p>
<b>Keywords</b> Customer perceptions, Customer experience, Customer-centric marketing, Service marketing

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## 1 Introduction and research questions

Excellence Finland is Finland's largest network for quality and development professionals. Under the brand umbrella Excellence Finland there are two separate entities: the Finnish Quality Association and Laatukeskus Excellence Finland Ltd. The Finnish Quality Association is a non-profit organization that has been on a mission to improve Finland's competitiveness since 1966. The association currently has 350 member organizations from various industries and sectors. Excellence Finland offers its members a wide range of member benefits as well as course-based training and consultancy. Laatukeskus Excellence Finland Ltd. is a wholly owned, for-profit subsidiary of the Finnish Quality Association, and operates Excellence Finland's training and consulting business. A large part of Excellence Finland's visible commercial offering consists of course-based training.

Vocational Training is a fiercely competitive business sector. In Finland, the average cost of course-based training per employee was 330 euros in 2020 (Seppänen 2023). In 2015, the corresponding cost was 551 € (Seppänen 2023). Enterprises' investment in skills development has significantly decreased in Finland. Unsurprisingly, the share of companies offering course-based training in Finland has also decreased (Seppänen 2023). A similar trend is visible throughout Europe (Eurostat 2022).

Training courses are price-competitive products. Customers have many options, and it is easy to shop around for a service provider – even globally as much of the offering is nowadays available virtually. Excellence Finland is a small organization and cannot compete with volume. Competing with price is therefore not a viable pricing strategy for Excellence Finland nor does it reflect organization's values and brand image. Excellence Finland needs to find other, cost-effective ways to appeal to its potential customers. This is the starting point of this thesis.

The aim of this thesis is to develop marketing of Excellence Finland's training courses. Among its course-based training products Excellence Finland offers training courses on EFQM Model. The EFQM Model is a globally recognized management framework that supports organizations in managing change and improving performance (EFQM 2024). Since the start of the Covid pandemic, all EFQM Foundation courses have been delivered remotely. Face-to-face delivery is not offered, nor are there any plans to do so. The courses are delivered via Microsoft Teams. All courses last for a day and include a short pre-assignment and an extended homework assignment.

The number of participants typically attending EFQM Foundation course is currently not at a satisfactory level and has seen a decrease in recent years. Moreover, low participant numbers have a direct effect on EFQM advanced course, as participation in the advanced course requires

attendance of the EFQM Foundation course. Excellence Finland wants to understand how to increase the attractiveness of the course without significant investments in advertising. This thesis focuses on studying EFQM Foundation course, and how the marketing content, wording and marketing materials can be improved to make the course more appealing to potential customers.

The key research questions for this thesis are

**RQ 1 How customers perceive Excellence Finland's EFQM Foundation course?**

RQ 1.1 What makes the training worth attending?

RQ 1.2 What requires improvement?

**RQ 2 How well marketing messaging aligns with the interests of customers?**

RQ 2.1 What type of messaging is used to market EFQM Foundation course?

RQ 2.2 Does marketing messaging align with the interests of customers?

**RQ3 How can the marketing messaging be improved to make it more appealing to potential customers?**

In chapter 2, the theoretical framework is introduced, providing the foundation for understanding service marketing and customer-centric marketing. After that, chapter 3 presents the research methodology, detailing the case study approach and the three-step research process: customer feedback analysis, thematic interviews, and content analysis. Then, chapter 4 discusses the results of the study. It begins with an examination of customer perceptions of the EFQM Foundation course (4.1) and continues with an analysis of the alignment between marketing messages and customer interests (4.2). Finally, chapter 5 provides a discussion of the findings, offering practical recommendations for improving marketing practices, reflecting on the research process, and suggesting areas for future studies. This thesis follows Haaga-Helia reporting guidelines and referencing guidelines, published on Haaga-Helia's website.

## 2 Theoretical framework

The following theoretical framework examines study and discussion around service marketing and customer-centric marketing. Service marketing and customer-centric marketing are the foundation for this framework, as both emphasize the need to align marketing strategies with the needs, preferences, and perceptions of the target audience, the customer. Given the research focus on how Excellence Finland's EFQM Foundation course is perceived and how its marketing resonates with potential customers, understanding what shapes perceptions is essential. This framework aims to help understand how marketing can be made more appealing and engaging to potential customers.

### 2.1 Marketing management and service marketing

The overarching concept of this research is marketing. According to Kotler, Armstrong, Balasubramanian & Agnihotri (2024, chapter 1) marketing is about getting customers, building strong relationships with them and creating value for them. In return, a company will get value from customers. Also, according to Kotler et al. (2024, chapter 1) marketing is not only about making a sale but about satisfying customer needs. Marketers must engage with consumers, understand their needs and develop products that provide superior customer value (Kotler et al. 2024, chapter 1). Kotler et al. (2024, chapter 1) identify three overarching objectives for marketing: 1) attracting new customers by offering superior value, 2) retaining and growing current customers by providing the promised value, and 3) contributing to long-term company profitability by recapturing the delivered value from satisfied and loyal customers. For the purpose of this thesis we must examine further the theories of service marketing, customer satisfaction and creating customer value.

Vargo and Lusch (2004) discuss the origins of service marketing as a response to the inadequacies of the traditional goods-based manufacturing model. This model focused on standardized, tangible outputs produced independently of consumer interaction and later distributed to meet demand. While this framework served its purpose during a period dominated by tangible goods production, it proved insufficient as marketing began addressing the exchange of non-manufactured offerings. Service marketing developed as a subdiscipline to bridge this gap, addressing the need for theories that accounted for processes and activities rather than physical products (Vargo and Lusch 2004, 324–325). The evolution of service marketing has been significant in challenging the dominance of goods-centered thinking. All marketing should therefore adopt a service-dominant logic, emphasizing the centrality of service in all forms of exchange. (Vargo and Lusch 2004, 325–327.)

Service marketing extends beyond the traditional four P's of marketing mix that include product, price, place and promotion (e.g. Kotler et al. 2024, chapter 1). In order to take customers into the mix service marketing refers to seven P's of marketing adding process, physical place and people into the mix (Wirtz and Lovelock 2018, 18). Process highlights the importance of focusing efforts on *how* things are done in addition to what is done. Badly designed service processes can lead to disappointing customers even before the actual service is delivered. The physical environment where service is delivered can have a profound impact on customer satisfaction and how service is perceived. Many companies invest a lot in the interior, materials and other elements that create desired experience for customers. People are a core of many service businesses. Whether the service is delivered in a way that matches or exceeds customers' expectations is much reliant on the attitude and skills of the people delivering the service. (Wirtz and Lovelock 2018, 18-23.)

## 2.2 Defining service quality

Vargo and Lusch (2004, 326) say that service is the use of specialized skills and knowledge for the benefit of another person or the person themselves. They highlight that service marketing has long been considered a subdiscipline for marketing (Vargo and Lusch 2004, 324). Wirtz and Lovelock (2018, 12) define services as economic activities between two parties and often time-based. Customers expect value for their money, time and effort. (Wirtz and Lovelock 2018, 12).

Customers today have large selections of products and services to choose from. According to Kotler et al. (2024, chapter 1) customers often buy from companies that offer the highest customer-perceived value. When a buyer feels that a product's or service's perceived performance matches or exceeds their expectations, customer satisfaction is increased (Kotler et al. 2024, chapter 1). Christian Grönroos (2016, chapter 4) writes that in service quality literature the quality of a particular product or service is whatever the customer perceives it to be. Grönroos separates two basic dimensions of service quality: technical and functional quality.

**Technical Quality ("what")** is the outcome or result of the service process (e.g., receiving a meal, a completed repair). This dimension is often measurable and objective. While technical quality is essential, functional quality often creates differentiation. A competitive edge is achieved by providing superior service processes and encounters. (Grönroos 2016, chapter 4.)

**Functional Quality ("how")** is the manner in which the service is delivered, including interactions with employees, accessibility, and customer involvement. This dimension is highly subjective and depends on customer perception. (Grönroos 2016, chapter 4.)

Service Quality depends on both what is delivered (technical quality) and how it is delivered (functional quality). Additionally, factors like customer expectations, company image, and marketing communications significantly shape perceived quality. Grönroos says that service quality differs fundamentally from the quality of goods. While the quality of goods often relates to technical specifications, service quality emerges during the simultaneous production and consumption process, heavily influenced by customer interactions and perceptions. (Grönroos 2016, chapter 4.)

**The concept of perceived service quality** focuses on how customers evaluate service based on their expectations and experiences. It incorporates the dual dimensions of technical and functional quality, as well as the overall perception shaped by expectations and external influences. Customers' expectations are influenced by marketing, company and brand image, and prior experiences as well as their actual experience of the service. If expectations and experiences are met or exceed expectations, perceived quality is positive. (Grönroos 2016, chapter 4.)

### **2.3 The role of marketing in perceived service quality**

Marketing in services is far more than promotion—it is a strategic tool for shaping expectations, managing perceptions, and fostering loyalty (e.g. Kotler et al. 2024, chapter 1). By aligning marketing efforts with operational capabilities, focusing on accurate and honest communication, and building a strong brand image, firms can enhance both functional and technical dimensions of service quality. Effective marketing ensures that the promises made to customers are not only fulfilled but also occasionally exceeded, strengthening competitive advantage in service-oriented industries. (Grönroos 2016, chapter 4.)

According to Grönroos (2016, chapter 4) marketing plays a significant role in perceived service quality. Overpromising in marketing can harm perceived quality, even if technical and functional dimensions are objectively high (Grönroos 2016, chapter 4). Marketing can help manage customer expectations through accurate messaging and creating positive interactions with customers. Misaligned marketing messages can undermine even well-executed service processes and negatively impact perceived quality. To succeed, a company should focus on functional quality as a competitive differentiator while maintaining acceptable technical standards. Effective marketing campaigns should align with service delivery capabilities to ensure that promises are kept. (Grönroos 2016, chapter 4.)

Marketing activities such as advertising, direct mail, sales promotions, and social media communication create expectations about the service (Grönroos 2016, chapter 4). Company or brand image also shapes how customers perceive service quality. A strong image can mitigate minor service failures, while a poor image amplifies them. Marketing campaigns, public relations,

and brand-building activities are critical for maintaining a positive image that supports perceived service quality. (Grönroos 2016, chapter 4.)

Beyond meeting expectations, marketing can create opportunities to exceed them through unexpected positive experiences, such as small, unanticipated benefits or "surprises." Underpromising and overdelivering is a good strategy to ensure customer satisfaction and foster loyalty. (Grönroos 2016, chapter 4; Kotler et al. 2024, chapter 1).

For quality programs to succeed, marketing must collaborate closely with service operations. This ensures that external communications accurately reflect the service's technical and functional capabilities. Marketing professionals should participate in quality development processes to avoid conflicts between promotional promises and operational realities. (Grönroos 2016, chapter 4.)

## **2.4 Defining customer-centric marketing**

Kennedy and Laczniak (2016) examine different conceptualizations of consumers in marketing thought over time and their implications for customer-centric marketing. Their study strongly advocates for customer-centric marketing as the ideal approach. The authors argue that genuine customer orientation is the "grand vision" of marketing, embodied in concepts like the marketing concept and relationship marketing. (Kennedy and Laczniak 2016, 168.) However, they note that reality often diverges from this customer-centric ideal, with many companies failing to truly prioritize customer interests. (Kennedy and Laczniak 2016, 169.)

Many companies claim to be customer-oriented, but often this is merely corporate jargon without authentic connection to strategy or practices. According to Yrjölä (2021, 206-207), managers for example often struggle to accurately understand customer preferences and satisfaction drivers, systematically failing to step into their customers' shoes. Yrjölä (2021, 210) suggests that customer-centricity could be achieved by putting emphasis on direct customer interaction and qualitative research methods that can provide marketing with deeper, more nuanced insights into customer needs, preferences, and behaviors. This outside-in approach also advocates for customer-focused metrics that measure perceived value, which could help more accurately assess the effectiveness of marketing efforts and their impact on customer satisfaction and loyalty. (Yrjölä, 2021, 211-212.) Satisfaction has also been found to have an indirect positive influence on learning (Grohmann and Kauffield, 2013), which adds value in the context of this study that focuses on marketing training courses.

The emphasis on understanding how customers perceive quality can guide marketers in designing and delivering superior customer experiences (Yrjölä 2021, 21). Insights gained from direct customer interaction and qualitative research can inform more effective and resonant marketing

communications (Yrjölä 2021, 210-211). By adopting an outside-in approach, marketing could move beyond more traditional product-centric strategies to create more customer-centric, value-driven marketing initiatives that are likely to yield better results.

In social media context customer-centric perspective is equally important. For example, Li, Larimo & Leonidou (2021, 50-54) emphasize the importance of understanding customer motivations, engaging customers, and building long-term relationships. Social media marketing strategies should be customer-focused rather than product-centric. For most companies, the ongoing challenge is not to initiate social media campaigns, but to combine social media with their marketing strategy to engage customers to build valuable and long-term relationships with them. (Li et al. 2021, 51.) The study highlights the importance of understanding customer motivations as a prerequisite for developing effective social media marketing strategies (Li et al. 2021, 54). In discussing social media content strategy, a customer-centric strategy can be described as such where the content is useful, relevant, compelling, and timely (Li et al. 2021, 58). Social media strategies that are designed to engage customers in a collaborative conversation with the aim of providing beneficial value in a transparent business environment are considered very customer-centric. (Li et al. 2021, p. 60).

Companies are increasingly using data-driven approaches to understand and predict consumer preferences (e.g. Davenport and Harris 2009, 24). In the context of cultural products, Davenport and Harris (2009) examine various approaches to predicting consumer preferences and product success, discussing their implications for both consumers and producers. Recommendation technologies aim to help overwhelmed consumers navigate the "paradox of choice" in a world with an increasing number of cultural products. Customer-centric approaches like Netflix's recommendation system have been found to improve customer satisfaction. (Davenport and Harris 2009, 26-27.)

The study by Yum and Kim (2024) touches on word-of-mouth marketing as an important outcome of customer satisfaction in the context of cultural products, more specifically, entertainment platforms. The study suggests that satisfied customers not only continue their associations with a company but also evolve into "passionate brand advocates who enthusiastically recommend the company to others" (Yum & Kim 2024, 4). According to Yum and Kim this transformation of satisfied customers into brand advocates is particularly significant in the digital age, where recommendations can spread rapidly through online platforms and social networks.

## 2.5 Customer-centric content in marketing

To better understand what is considered effective customer-centric content, we can examine research on content marketing. Holliman and Rowley (2014) explore the emerging phenomenon of business-to-business (B2B) digital content marketing through interviews with 15 B2B marketing practitioners. The paper positions B2B digital content marketing within a wider framework of digital content marketing types and emphasizes the importance of community and value in all forms of digital content marketing (Holliman and Rowley 2014, 287-289). According to Holliman and Rowley (2014, 284) creating great content means providing value to customers by helping them solve problems or complete tasks. The authors note that content should be created according to the needs of the customer or intended recipient, and these needs must be defined by research and testing (Holliman and Rowley 2014, 283).

Marketers must create content that is valuable and useful to customers. Müller and Christandl (2019) label good content as something where consumer interests are prioritized over explicit sales pitches. Content produced for content marketing purposes needs to be free of selling messages and instead needs to focus on the interests of consumers (Müller and Christandl 2019, 51).

Engaging, and value adding content is interesting to the audience. Content adds value by helping the audience do something better or solve a specific problem in their professional life. (Holliman and Rowley 2014, 284.) This supports the need for service marketers to shift from product-centric to customer-centric messaging.

Though not particularly focused on creating effective content, Gregurec, Mandić and Bakić (2024) also highlight the importance of understanding and meeting customer needs in B2B communication. Gregurec et al. focus on educational content marketing in ICT companies. For example, the authors mention that companies need to provide content that answers five questions: who will consume the content, what the company can offer and when, where, and how companies can deliver the content (Gregurec et al. 2024, 125). Their research emphasizes the importance of creating content that is relevant and valuable to the target audience (Gregurec et al. 2024, 124-125).

## 2.6 Bridging the gap between customer expectations and experience

Zeithaml, Bitner and Gremler (2010) discuss in their paper how to close the gap between customer expectations and perceptions by addressing four gaps: listening, service design and standards, performance, and communication. The paper highlights the importance of delivering experiences and building customer relationships. *The listening gap* is about understanding customer expectations through research, relationship building, and service recovery. *The service design gap*

discusses ways to translate customer expectations into quality service by properly designing and standardizing their service processes. *The performance gap* refers to a situation where there is a difference between the service standards designed and the actual service provided. According to Zeithaml et al. even if a company has bridged the listening gap and the service design gap, it may still fail to meet customer expectations if it cannot deliver the service as planned. Performance gaps occur when the company does not provide enough resources, support, or enforcement to meet the set service standards. To close the performance gap, companies need to make sure employees are well-trained, motivated, and have the tools they need to consistently deliver high-quality service. (Zeithaml et al. 2010, Chapter: GAP 3 – The performance gap.)

The final gap for companies to close is *the communication gap* between service delivery and customer expectations. To fix this gap companies need to look at integrated marketing, managing expectations, internal communication, brand image, and pricing. Integrated services marketing communication ensures consistent messaging across various channels, including websites, personal sales, and mobile advertising. Managing customer expectations throughout the service experience is crucial, especially when services change over time due to business realities or financial pressures. (Zeithaml et al. 2010, Chapter: GAP 4 – The communication gap.)

Zeithaml et al. (2010) use a model known as the services marketing triangle (figure 1) to highlight the importance of people in delivering service promises and building customer relationships.

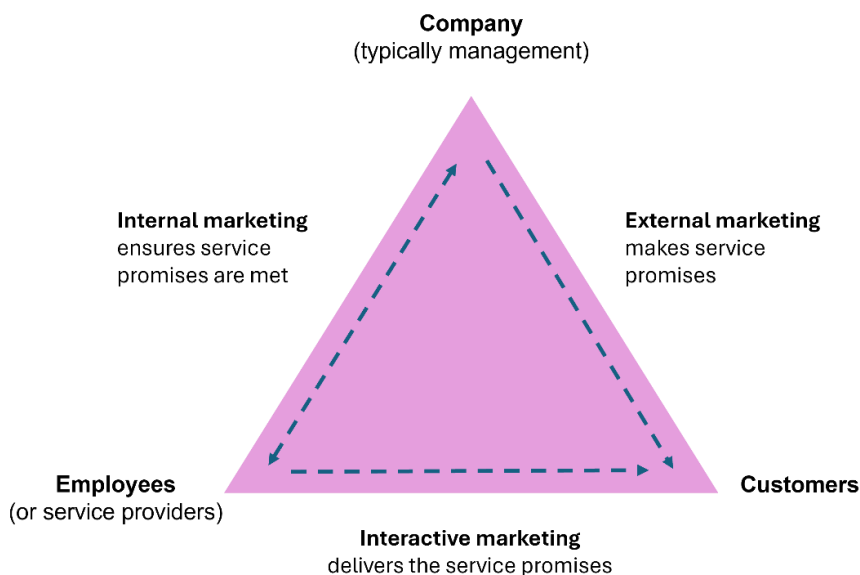


Figure 1. Service marketing triangle (adapted from Zeithaml et al. 2010)

The service marketing triangle highlights three types of marketing necessary for service success: external marketing, interactive marketing and internal marketing. According to Zeithaml et al.

(2010) the service marketing triangle model illustrates the core idea of service marketing: services are based on promises that a company makes and delivers to customers.

There are three key players in the service marketing triangle:

- 1. The company:** responsible for making and keeping service promises, may often refer to company's management
- 2. Customers:** the recipients of the experience who assess the quality of the service.
- 3. Service providers:** company's employees, subcontractors, or other agents who deliver the service.

Marketing activities take place between different key players. In table 1 I have explained each marketing element of the service marketing triangle in more detail.

Table 1. Elements of service marketing triangle (adapted from Zeithaml et al. 2010)

	<b>External marketing</b>	<b>Interactive marketing</b>	<b>Internal marketing</b>
<b>Who</b>	Between the company and its customers	Between customers and the company's service providers	Between the company and its service providers
<b>What</b>	The company makes service promises and thus sets customer expectations	Service is delivered to customers and service promise is either being fulfilled or broken	The company supports its service providers to ensure service promise is met
<b>When</b>	Prior to actual service delivery	The actual moment when service is delivered	Prior to actual service delivery
<b>How</b>	All communication with customers prior to service delivery is considered part of external marketing	Depending on the service employees, subcontractors or other stakeholders deliver the service	Can include multiple activities such as recruiting, training, motivating, rewarding, and providing the necessary technology and tools

All three sides of the service marketing triangle must be aligned to ensure that what is promised through external marketing matches what is delivered, supported by internal marketing activities.

The theoretical framework presented in this chapter serves as the foundation for analyzing both customer perceptions and marketing materials during the research process. Key concepts from service marketing and customer-centric marketing are applied throughout the study to understand and evaluate how the EFQM Foundation course is marketed and experienced. Specifically, the theories of perceived service quality and the dual dimensions of technical and functional quality provide critical lenses for examining customer feedback and identifying strengths and gaps in the service offering. In the chapter 5, the research refers back to theoretical framework examining how the theory and research results align. Overall, the theoretical framework is used to provide both a conceptual foundation and practical tools for conducting the research, analyzing the findings, and formulating recommendations that are grounded in established marketing and service quality principles.

### 3 Methodology

This chapter explains the research methodology used to gain in-depth insight into the two main research questions of this theses: how the customers experience the training product and how the product has been marketed to potential customers. A case study approach has been chosen because it allows for a comprehensive exploration of real-life phenomena within their natural context, providing rich, detailed data that would be difficult to obtain through other methods (Yin 2018). By focusing on a single case or a small number of cases, this method enables a thorough understanding of complex issues, such as customer perceptions and marketing strategies, and helps to identify patterns and insights that can inform broader conclusions (Stake 1995).

The approach includes desktop study on existing material related to customer experience, semi-structured interviews with training participants and content analysis of existing marketing materials related to the training.

#### 3.1 Research process overview

In this research I followed a structured, three-step approach: 1) analysis of qualitative customer feedback, 2) semi-structured interviews with customers and 3) content analysis to identify and compare differences between the marketing messages and the actual customer experience. Finally, I give development suggestions to improve marketing argumentation that would make the course more appealing to potential customers.

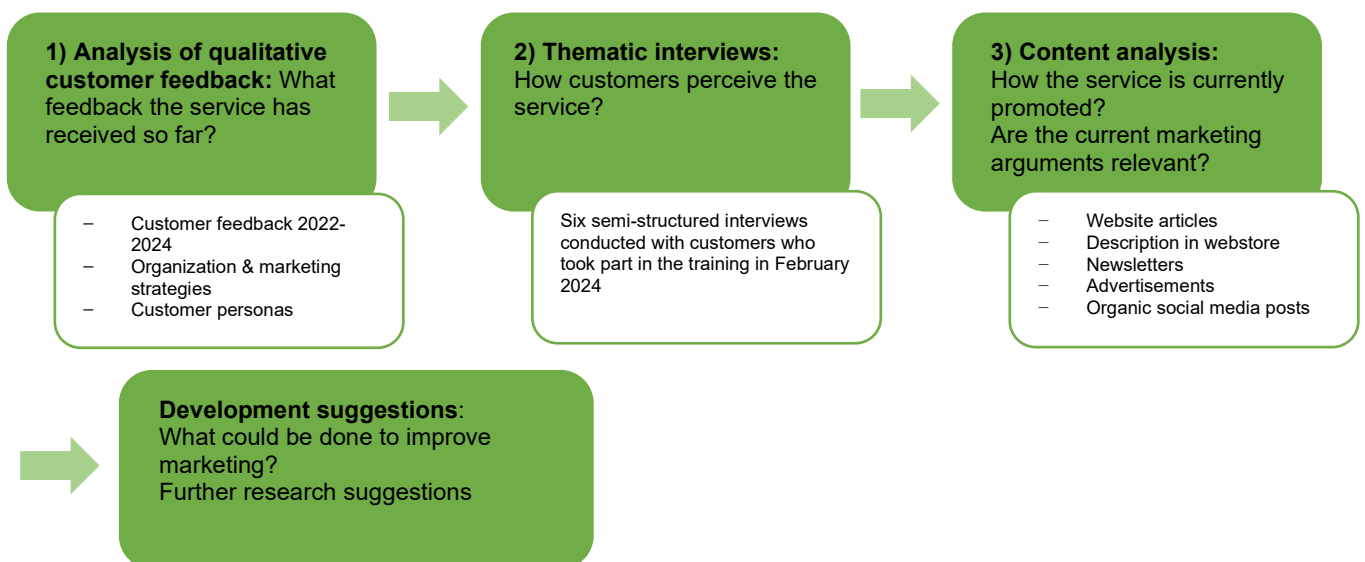


Figure 2. Research design

### 3.2 Step 1: Analysis on existing customer feedback

The first research question of this thesis is to find out how current customers perceive Excellence Finland's EFQM Foundation course. What, in the participants' opinion, makes the course worth attending and what requires improvement? The goal of the research is to understand what information about customer experience is already available regarding the subject matter, build a solid foundation of existing knowledge, identify gaps in the current research and recognize trend and data that could inform the subsequent stages of the study. To do this, I reviewed existing customer feedback, marketing strategies and plans as well as customer personas created for marketing purposes. I focused particularly on the existing customer feedback as it had been systematically collected over the years and included customer viewpoints directly related to the research questions. Customer feedback was analyzed from EFQM Foundation courses organized between 15.2.2022-15.2.2024. In addition, I took part in the EFQM Foundation course 15 February 2024 to experience and examine firsthand how the course was taught. This gave better understanding of the training and helped to formulate relevant questions for customer interviews.

Table 2 provides a comprehensive list of all materials that have been reviewed in relation to customer feedback on training or related guidance material. The material has been accessed via Excellence Finland's internal web drive. All materials reviewed are confidential as they include business-critical sensitive information.

Table 2. List of analyzed materials related to customer feedback

Document name	Content type	Format
Palautekysely_EFQM-mallin_perusteet_15.2.2024	Customer feedback	Excel
Palautekysely_EFQM-mallin_perusteet_21.9.2023	Customer feedback	Excel
Palautekysely_EFQM-mallin_perusteet_15.6.2023	Customer feedback	Excel
Palautekysely_EFQM-mallin_perusteet_26.4.2023	Customer feedback	Excel
Palautekysely_EFQM-mallin_perusteet_2.3.2023	Customer feedback	Excel
Palautekysely_EFQM-mallin_perusteet_27.9.2022	Customer feedback	Excel
Palautekysely_EFQM-mallin_perusteet_6.6.2022	Customer feedback	Excel
Palautekysely_EFQM_-mallin_perusteet_7.3.2022	Customer feedback	Excel

Palautekysely_EFQM_-mallin_perusteet_15.2.2022	Customer feedback	Excel
Brändi-identiteetti ja graafinen ohjeisto	Brand guidelines	PowerPoint
Markkinoinnin toimintasuunnitelma 2024	Marketing plan	PowerPoint
Markkinointi- ja viestintäsuunnitelma 2023	Marketing plan	Excel
Markkinointi- ja viestintäsuunnitelma 2022	Marketing plan	Excel
Asiakaspersoonat	Customer personas	PowerPoint

The existing customer feedback was dispersed across nine separate Excel files. No summary or other analysis of customer feedback was available. I utilized an AI-based application, ChatGPT, to conduct an analysis of customer experience. I created a prompt for AI to generate a summary of the collected customer feedback. I instructed the AI to categorize the summary based on the themes identified in customer feedback. To develop an effective prompt, I referenced Marja-Leena Lehtimäki's thesis on the ethical use of AI (Lehtimäki 2024, 109-110) and refined the prompt to align with my objectives. I reviewed and refined the analysis generated by the AI. The prompt provided to the AI is included in Appendix 1.

### 3.3 Step 2: Thematic interviews with customers

To gain deeper understanding of the customer perceptions of the EFQM course, and to explore the first research question of this thesis further, I conducted six semi-structured thematic interviews with customers, who had participated in the EFQM Foundation course in February 2024.

Semi-structured interviews are an intermediate form of questionnaire interviews and unstructured interviews in which some parts of the interview are fixed, but not all (Hirsjärvi and Hurme 2022, chapter 4). Hirsjärvi and Hurme (2022, chapter 4) refer to this method as thematic interviewing. Thematic interviews include an outline of what to ask, and in addition a list of questions can be added to the inventory. The themes and question formats need to be thought through to ensure that the necessary information is obtained. However, the interviewer can make situational adjustments during the interview. (Hirsjärvi and Hurme 2022, chapter 6.) The aim of the interviews in this thesis was to deepen the understanding of how customers perceive and evaluate the service. To achieve this, I felt it to be important to be able to deviate from the interview script if a theme required further discussion. By using a semi-structured interview format, I was able to guide the conversation while allowing for open-ended responses. By building the interview script around themes already identified in the qualitative customer feedback allowed examining the themes

further. Therefore, a thematic interview was ideally suited to the needs of this study. The outline of the interview can be found in appendix 2.

All interviewees received an invitation to the interview by email. The invitation was sent to all eight customers who attended EFQM Foundation course in February 2024. Six responded positively to the interview invitation. The date of the interview was agreed by e-mail. The interviews were conducted via Microsoft Teams in February and March 2024. According to Hirsjärvi and Hurme (2022, chapter 4) the process of collecting data should do justice to the abilities and thought processes of the interviewees, which is why it is important to take language into account in the interviews. Finnish was the native language of all interviewees. Thus, the interviews were conducted in Finnish, and later transcribed and translated into English. Translations were done using DeepL translation tool.

It is typical for the thematic interviews to record them (Hirsjärvi and Hurme 2022, chapter 6). In this study the recordings were done with Microsoft Teams. All interviewees' consent to the recording was obtained prior to the interview. The interviewees were also informed after the start of the recording that the interview would be recorded. All interviews were transcribed from the recordings.

Table 3 summarizes the schedule and method of the interviews. At the request of the commissioning organization, the identity of the interviewees will be kept anonymous. Revealing the identity of interviewees will provide information about their client relationships, which should be kept confidential. Therefore, no names or organization details of the interviewees were included in the transcribed documents.

Table 3. Interviewees

<b>Interviewee</b>	<b>Date of the interview</b>	<b>Place of the interview</b>	<b>Duration of the interview</b>
Interviewee A	23.2.2024	Microsoft Teams	15 minutes
Interviewee B	26.2.2024	Microsoft Teams	21 minutes
Interviewee C	27.2.2024	Microsoft Teams	11 minutes
Interviewee D	28.2.2024	Microsoft Teams	14 minutes
Interviewee E	7.3.2024	Microsoft Teams	13 minutes
Interviewee F	13.3.2024	Microsoft Teams	10 minutes

I utilized ChatGPT to conduct the first analysis draft of the interviews. I created a prompt for AI to generate a summary of the collected customer feedback. I provided ChatGPT with the six transcribed and anonymized interviews and instructed the AI to provide me an analysis of the interviews. I asked the AI to identify themes relating to participants' experience and improvement suggestions. I reviewed and refined the analysis generated by ChatGPT. The prompt provided to the AI is included in Appendix 3.

I utilized once more ChatGPT, to conduct a comparative analysis on the feedback survey and the thematic interviews. I instructed ChatGPT to categorize the analysis based on the themes identified in the analysis of customer feedback in chapter 4.1.1 and analysis of thematic interviews in chapter 4.1.2. I formulated a prompt that asked to identify similarities and differences between the interview answers and the earlier customer feedback as well as to identify potential new themes that were not included in the customer feedback. I reviewed and refined the analysis generated by ChatGPT. The prompt provided to the AI is included in Appendix 4.

### **3.4 Step 3: Content analysis of marketing materials**

To answer the second research question of this thesis, how well does the current marketing argumentation align with the interests of customers, I carried out a content analysis of the marketing materials used for EFQM Foundation course. The content analysis was designed to particularly answer the research question 2.1 "What type of argumentation is currently used to market EFQM Foundation course".

Excellence Finland uses email marketing, Meta's Facebook and Instagram, LinkedIn, its own website and occasionally purchased digital marketing space in channels such as Sanoma or Alma Media as marketing channels for its training courses. In addition, Excellence Finland's partners and customers occasionally remarket training courses on their own channels. To be able to assess customer-driven marketing specifically in relation to the EFQM Foundation course, the following limitations were set for the marketing materials analyzed:

1. Marketing material must clearly refer to the EFQM Foundation course.
2. The content of the marketing material is created by Excellence Finland and therefore controlled by the organization.

3. Marketing material must contain at least one element related to customer experience or perception. For example, text-based advertisements that only state the name of the course, the date and the price are excluded from this analysis, as the material does not convey any additional information that would appeal to the customer's interests.

4. Marketing material is published between September 2021 and present date. This thesis focuses on EFQM Foundation courses organized between 15.2.2022-15.2.2024. As marketing for each EFQM course starts roughly six months prior to the actual training day, the marketing materials analyzed should not be published earlier than September 2021. It should be noted, however, that customer perceptions and interest in the service may have been formed more than six months before the actual course started. Since it is not possible to know from the customer feedback when each respondent first heard about the EFQM Foundation course, marketing materials published in September 2021 or later are included in the analysis.

With these limitations, altogether 16 marketing materials were selected for content analysis: 9 newsletters, 3 e-commerce training descriptions, 2 articles and 2 digital ads. Table 4 lists all marketing materials analyzed. Some of the material can still be found on public sources, some are accessed via Excellence Finland's internal material bank or company's social media accounts. Figure 3 presents examples of the marketing materials.

Table 4. List of marketing materials analyzed

<b>Material</b>	<b>Channel</b>	<b>Format</b>	<b>Date published</b>	<b>Accessed via</b>
Marketing material A	Email marketing	Newsletter ad	30.1.2024	Liana mailer account
Marketing material B	Email marketing	Newsletter	30.5.2023	Liana mailer account
Marketing material C	Email marketing	Newsletter ad	12.5.2023	Liana mailer account
Marketing material D	Email marketing	Newsletter	12.4.2023	Liana mailer account

Marketing material E	Email marketing	Newsletter	30.3.2023	Liana mailer account
Marketing material F	Email marketing	Newsletter	13.4.2022	Liana mailer account
Marketing material G	Email marketing	Newsletter ad	11.1.2022	Liana mailer account
Marketing material H	Email marketing	Newsletter	14.12.2021	Liana mailer account
Marketing material I	Email marketing	Newsletter	12.10.2021	Liana mailer account
Marketing material J	E-commerce site	Service / course description	1.11.2024	Company website
Marketing material K	E-commerce site	Service / course description	1.11.2023	Internal material bank
Marketing material L	E-commerce site	Service / course description	1.11.2021	Internal material bank
Marketing material M	LinkedIn	Social media post	7.3.2024	Company LinkedIn
Marketing material N	Alma Talent digital channels	Display ad	24.1.2022	Internal material bank
Marketing material O	Company website	Expert article	7.3.2024	Company website
Marketing material P	Company website	Expert article	10.1.2022	Company website

**Ilmoittaudu tuleviin EFQM-koulutuksiin!**

**Kehitä osaamistasi EFQM-koulutuksissa!**

Joko hyödyntät työssäsi EFQM-mallia? EFQM-malli on laajasti käytetty työkalu organisaation toiminnan strategian suuntaiseen kokonaisvaltaiseen johtamiseen, kehittämiseen ja arviointiin. Se tähtää kilpailukykyyn ja toiminnan tuloksellisuuden parantamiseen ja nostaa esiin myös kestävä kehityksen näkökulman organisaation toiminnassa.

Koulutuksitamme liittyy vaihtoehtoja EFQM-polun eri vaiheisiin. Lue alta lisää koulutusvaihtoehtojamme ja ilmoittaudu mukaan!

**Uutuuksia tänä keväänä on ruotsinkielinen EFQM-ansiökoulutus.**

**EFQM-mallin perusteet**

Koulutuksessa perehdytään EFQM-mallin ja RADARin sekä niiden hyödyntämiseen organisaation kehittämiseksi. Koulutuksessa opit, **kuinka EFQM-malli voisi hyödyttää organisaatiosi** niin nykyisten kuin tulevien haasteiden ratkaisemisessa. Koulutus on hyvä kokonaisuus sellaisenaan EFQM-mallista ja organisaation toiminnan kehittämiseksi kiinnostuneille. Lisäksi se mahdollistaa osallistumisen EFQM-arviojakoulutukseen sekä EFQM-

**Haluatko parantaa johtamista, kilpailukykyä ja tuloksia? EFQM-mallilla se onnistuu!**

LAATUKESKUS EXCELLENCE FINLAND **Lue artikkeli**

**strategista osaamista**

kehittää systemaattista strategian panna? EFQM-malli on laajuisesti käytetty työkalu organisaation toiminnan strategian suuntaiseen kokonaisvaltaiseen johtamiseen, kehittämiseen ja arviointiin. Se tähtää kilpailukykyyn ja toiminnan tuloksellisuuden parantamiseen ja nostaa esiin myös kestävä kehityksen näkökulman organisaation toiminnassa.

**t koulutukset:**

**EFQM-mallin perusteet 15.2.**

**"Laaja käytettävyys viitekehyksenä ja check-listana"**

**EFQM-mallin perusteet**

**Ilmoittaudu EFQM-mallin perusteet -koulutukseen 15.6.**

Hyödyntät työssäsi EFQM-mallia? EFQM-malli on laajasti käytetty työkalu organisaation strategian suuntaiseen kokonaisvaltaiseen johtamiseen, kehittämiseen ja arviointiin. Se tähtää kilpailukykyyn ja toiminnan tuloksellisuuden parantamiseen ja nostaa esiin myös kestävä kehityksen näkökulman organisaation toiminnassa.

**EFQM-mallin perusteet -koulutus on oivallinen aloitus EFQM-polullasi.** Koulutuksessa perehdytään EFQM-mallin ja RADARin sekä niiden hyödyntämiseen organisaation kehittämiseksi opit, **kuinka EFQM-malli voisi hyödyttää organisaatiosi** niin nykyisten kuin tulevien haasteiden ratkaisemisessa. Koulutus on hyvä kokonaisuus sellaisenaan EFQM-mallista ja organisaation toiminnan kehittämiseksi kiinnostuneille. Lisäksi se mahdollistaa osallistumisen EFQM-arviojakoulutukseen sekä EFQM-muutosjohtajakoulutukseen.

**Ilmoittautumiset toteutuvat: 21.9. | 28.11.**

**Ilmoittaudu tänä keväänä!**

**excellence finland**

**EFQM-mallin perusteet**

**Ilmoittaudu EFQM-mallin perusteet -koulutukseen!**

Hyödyntät työssäsi EFQM-mallia? EFQM-malli on laajasti käytetty työkalu organisaation strategian suuntaiseen kokonaisvaltaiseen johtamiseen, kehittämiseen ja arviointiin. Se tähtää kilpailukykyyn ja toiminnan tuloksellisuuden parantamiseen ja nostaa esiin myös kestävä kehityksen näkökulman organisaation toiminnassa.

**Ilmoittaudu tänä keväänä!**

**Maksuttomia paikkoja päättävälle jäsenille**

Ilmoittautumiset toteutuvat: 21.9. | 28.11.

Ilmoittaudu tänä keväänä!

**Avaa ovi organisaation kehittämiseen**

Asiantuntijablogi: Johtaminen, Laadun kehittäminen | Julkaistu: 07.03.2024

**excellence finland** BLOGI

**Excellence Finland**  
2,455 followers

Oletko kuullut EFQM-mallista? Se tarjoaa syällisen näkemyksen organisaation kokonaisvaltaiseen kehittämiseen, strategiseen suunnitteluun ja tulosten saavuttamiseen.

Ja periaatteet toimivat - riippumatta organisaation koosta tai siitä, toimiko se julkisella, yksityisellä vai kolmannella sektorilla!

Lue Timo Kuntsin ajatuksia siitä, miksi EFQM-malli on nyt tärkeämpi kuin koskaan ja miten se voi auttaa organisaatioita saavuttamaan pitkän aikavälin menestystä: <https://lnkd.in/d/F8EDZMz>

#ExcellenceFinland #johtaja #EFQM #organisaationkehittäminen #strateginenjohtaminen

**Toiminnan kehittämisen työkalu: EFQM**

**HINTA PÄÄTTÄVILLE JÄSENIILLE**  
**525,00 €**  
+ ALV 25,5 %

**NORMAALIHINTA**  
**700,00 €**  
+ ALV 25,5 %

Toteutus: Valitse

**Kansainvälinen EFQM-malli vastaa tämän päivän johtamisen haasteisiin**

Johtaminen | Julkaistu: 10.01.2022

Figure 3. Examples of marketing materials analyzed

Content analysis involved a systematic examination of the language, imagery, and argumentation used. I compiled the marketing materials into an Excel file with main categories: visuals, textual content, other elements. For each material I aimed to answer five main questions:

1. Which need the material primary addresses: what, why, who, how?
2. What argumentation, phrases or words are used regarding service promise?
3. Does visual messaging convey service promise?
4. Are the key themes that emerged from the analyses used to market the service?
  - a. Course content: Direct applicability, Real-life examples, Cross-industry insights, Detailed overview
  - b. Training material: Easy to follow material, Materials for post-course reflection
  - c. Practical applications: Direct applicability, Real-life examples, Diverse viewpoints, Cross-industry insights
  - d. Trainer: Expert trainers, Deep expertise
  - e. Delivery: Interactive group exercises, Structured and organized delivery, Accessible to participants anywhere, Dynamic breakout sessions to increase collaboration
  - f. Pace: time-efficient
5. Are there service promises that were not identified in previous analyses?

After categorizing each marketing material according to themes, and analyzing them, I then continued to compare the data, create assumption and summarize the findings. The results are presented in chapter 4.2.

## 4 Results of the study

The objective of this thesis was to find ways to improve marketing argumentation of Excellence Finland's training products to make marketing content better appeal to company's target audience. This section of the thesis answers the first two research questions. The last research question, how can marketing argumentation be improved to make the training more appealing to potential customers, is addressed in chapter 5.

**Research question 1: How do customers perceive Excellence Finland's EFQM Foundation course?** What makes the training worth attending? What requires improvement?

**Research question 2: How well does marketing messaging align with the interests of customers?** What type of argumentation is used to market EFQM Foundation course? Does the marketing messaging align with the interests of customers?

This chapter is structured to first address research question 1, which concerns the current customer experience of EFQM Foundation course. To address this research question, customer feedback from 2022 to 2024 was analyzed, and six professionals who participated in the training in 2024 were interviewed. The research question was addressed through an analysis of existing customer feedback (step 1) and semi-structured thematic interviews (step 2). The analysis provides a comprehensive overview of how Excellence Finland's current clients perceive EFQM Foundation course.

The chapter then addresses research question 2, namely, the alignment between the marketing content and customer interests. This question builds on the research done in steps 1 and 2. For the second research question, the marketing material of the EFQM Foundation course from 2021 to 2024 was analyzed. The results were compared with the findings of research question 1 and 2.

It should be noted that this thesis has deliberately focused on addressing the interests of customers in relation to the structural aspects of the training course. The analysis has not considered the professional background of participants or their role in their respective organizations, as this information has not been collected in the quantitative customer feedback data. Though this data is available for the six customers interviewed for the purpose of this thesis, generalizations cannot be on such small scale.

### 4.1 How do current customers perceive EFQM Foundation course?

Excellence Finland collects customer feedback on its training courses systematically after every training session. However, customer feedback is not analyzed on a regular basis, and no prior

analysis was available for the customer experience of EFQM Foundation course. The organization, therefore, does not know exactly how satisfied its clients have been on the EFQM Foundation course during the past years

The feedback questionnaire follows a specific format that is mostly based on numerical feedback.

Customers rate the following aspects of the training:

- overall experience
- content
- materials
- practical relevance
- trainer
- delivery
- customer service

Additionally, customers can choose to provide additional open form feedback on what they enjoyed most, what could be improved, why they chose this training, and to whom would they recommend the training.

For this study customer feedback was analyzed from EFQM Foundation courses organized between 15.2.2022-15.2.2024. The training sessions prior to October 2022 and to the onset of the pandemic were conducted in person on-site. Going forward, this training will no longer be held on-site. Given the significant differences in customer experience between in-person and distance delivery, it was not feasible to include earlier training feedback in the context of this study. To gain more detailed understanding of the feedback, artificial intelligence (ChatGPT) was employed to consolidate the responses from disparate Excel files and conduct a thematic analysis. I verified and refined the responses. The prompt provided to the AI is available (Appendix 1).

#### **4.1.1 Findings from customer feedback analysis**

Between 2022-2024 there were all together 9 separate training sessions and 65 participants in total. 25 participants completed the feedback survey that was sent to participants after each training session. The response rate was 38%. The feedback averages remained relatively consistent from year to year.

Most participants rated their overall experience high, with ratings typically around 5 out of 6, indicating satisfaction with the course. Customer comments indicate that their expectations were generally met. Many participants expressed satisfaction with the course structure and its alignment with expectations. Many participants indicated they would participate in similar trainings in the

future and expressed a high likelihood of recommending the training to colleagues. Respondents frequently cited the practical value, knowledgeable trainer, and relevance of the content as reasons they would recommend the course. Also, the customer service was rated high with answers varying mostly between 5 and 6 out of 6. For customer service, no additional feedback was available to explain what had been done well.

While ratings were high, some participants noted areas where further customization to specific needs or roles could enhance the experience. The primary areas for improvement focused on customizing content to various professional roles, adding more practical case studies, and slightly adjusting the pace for complex topics. There was also an interest in additional materials and further material that could be studied after the training. A few comments suggested promoting the course more widely across different industries to enhance its reach and impact.

Participants provided also insights into who would benefit most from the course and why they would recommend it. Many responses suggested that management-level professionals and quality assurance teams would gain significant value. Practicality, relevance, and the ability to directly apply learnings in professional settings were frequently cited as key reasons for recommending the training for these groups.

Most participants found out about the training either via company website, email marketing or a colleague had recommended the training. It's worth mentioning that none of the participants had received information about the training via social media. Mostly participants made the purchase decisions by themselves. In the case of 8 participants, the purchasing decision was made by their manager.

Table 5 presents the feedback in a structured format, organized by key theme with a summary of each theme, the strengths identified by participants, and suggestions for improvement.

Table 5. Thematic analysis of customer feedback 2022-2024

Key themes	Feedback summary	Strengths	Improvement ideas
Course content	Mostly positive. Most participants rate between 4 and 5. Participants appreciated the depth and practical relevance of the content.	Content was praised for being comprehensive and relevant to current professional needs. Many respondents found the practical applications and real-life examples particularly valuable.	More tailored content to align with specific professional roles was a common theme. More examples or case studies, especially relevant to specific industries. Expanding the course duration to cover more topics in-depth was also mentioned.
Training material	Very positive. Ratings mostly 5 or 6 out of 6. Usefulness and clarity of the material gets credit.	Many found the materials well-organized and supportive of the course content. Participants appreciated that the materials could be used for further reflection and application post-training.	Additional handouts or digital resources, like summary sheets or additional reading links, could further enhance the value of the materials. Few criticized the use of English in the material as the training itself was held in Finnish and the subject specific language difficult even in Finnish.
Practical relevance	Mostly positive. Many praised the ability to directly apply learnings in professional settings.	Many respondents found the practical applications and real-life examples valuable. Discussing and changing ideas with	More tailored content to align with specific professional roles was a common theme. Some participants suggested

		participants from different industries was said to be useful.	additional case studies and more time for practical exercises.
Trainer	Very positive. The trainers received high praise, with most ratings being 5 or 6 out of 6. Knowledge and ability to engage the audience were highlighted as key strengths.	The trainers were frequently commended for deep expertise, engaging delivery, and responsiveness to questions. Participants noted that the trainer's experience added credibility and depth to the course.	Some feedback suggested minor adjustments in delivery pace, particularly when covering complex topics, to allow more time for questions and reflection.
Delivery	Mostly positive. Participants were largely satisfied with the Teams environment and the organization of distant delivery.	Respondents appreciated the comfortable and conducive environment for learning. The course was well-structured and organized, contributing to a positive experience.	No clear major areas for development, but several individual development proposals. Some mentioned that hybrid options might enhance accessibility. Some remarked that in general training via Teams is challenging.
Other themes: Pace	Mostly positive. Opinions on the course pace were favorable, with participants indicating that the course maintained a good rhythm.	Many respondents found the pace suitable, maintaining engagement without overwhelming them with information.	Some indicated that the course could benefit from slightly slowing down during key sections, particularly when introducing complex concepts. One participant said that more time should have been allotted for the group exercises.

#### 4.1.2 Findings from customer interviews

As much of the structured customer feedback was quantitative, an additional 6 participants were selected to be interviewed about their views and experiences. Six semi-structured interviews were conducted with individuals who had previously completed the EFQM Foundation course in February 2024. These interviews were designed to gather more in-depth insights into the participants' experiences and perceptions of the training product.

**Customers' overall satisfaction** with the EFQM Foundation course was good. Several mentioned that the training was useful and comprehensive, even though the training is a concise, one-day program. For example, one participant noted that the content was surprisingly informative and thorough, even though the initial expectations were somewhat skeptical (described as "puff"). However, the short duration of the training left some participants wanting deeper dive into the subject or the opportunity to continue with more advanced courses.

**Experience regarding the trainer** was excellent. The expertise of the trainers was widely appreciated, and most interviewees found the trainers to be competent and well-prepared. However, experiences regarding the trainers' enthusiasm were mixed. While the content was strong, some participants felt the delivery was somewhat monotonous. One participant compared the session to a previous training with a more inspiring and provocative trainer, who made the material more engaging. This highlighted a preference for trainers who could bring more energy and dynamism to the presentation.

**Experience regarding training materials** varied a bit more. Opinions on the clarity and quality of the training materials were divided. Some participants found the materials clear and useful, while others felt they were somewhat outdated or even confusing. For example, a few participants noted that the materials switched between English and Finnish, which caused difficulties in following the training. One participant remarked that the visual style of the materials seemed old-fashioned and could benefit from modernization, while others found the materials easier to follow going through them after the training day.

**Experience regarding remote delivery** divided opinions. The overall customer experience was positive, even though the course's brevity and the trainers' presentation style did not always fully meet participants' expectations. The training was generally considered useful, especially when it offered practical examples and opportunities for comparing the practices of different organizations. The remote delivery of the course received mixed feedback: while some appreciated the flexibility of virtual learning, others missed the interactive aspects that are easier to achieve in face-to-face settings.

The interviews provided also with concrete suggestions on how to make the EFQM Foundation course more attractive to new customers. Three themes relevant to customer satisfaction were identified.

**More in-depth content** was sought after. Many participants felt the course was too brief and superficial given the complexity of the subject. One suggestion was to extend the course to a day and a half, allowing more time for deeper exploration of the topics. Additionally, some participants expressed a desire for more practical examples and exercises to make the theoretical aspects more relatable to real-world applications. Some suggested that providing preparatory assignments in advance would allow the training sessions to focus more on in-depth discussions.

**Increasing interaction** would have made the course less monotonous. Some participants felt the training experience could be improved by making it more interactive and engaging. This could include incorporating more group work, dynamic teaching methods, and leveraging the personality of the trainer to keep participants more engaged. An enthusiastic trainer can make even challenging topics easier to approach and more interesting. Interview feedback indicated a desire for trainers to personalize their teaching style and avoid making the training feel too “textbook-like”.

**More modern feel and flow** could raise the course to a next level. The course's appeal could be enhanced by improving the presentation and modernization of the materials. For instance, ensuring consistency in the language used throughout the materials could enhance the participants' experience. Additionally, communication in the education platform Priima could be improved. For example, one interviewee pointed out that it would be good to have confirmation on the return of homework whether the work has been received or not. Another interviewee suggested that more attention could be paid to the wording of the different sections of the tutorial to make navigation through Priima easier.

#### **4.1.3 What makes the course appealing to customers?**

Based on the analysis quantitative customer feedback survey (chapter 4.1.1) and the analysis of thematic interviews (chapter 4.1.2) the EFQM Foundation training has been largely successful in providing participants with useful tools and new perspectives on organizational development. The interviews complemented and deepened the understanding of the themes identified in the customer feedback analysis. They affirmed the core strengths of the training while providing more specific critiques of delivery methods and trainer engagement. Furthermore, they uncovered new areas for improvement, particularly regarding group dynamics, teaching styles, and preferences for in-person formats.

While customer feedback offered uniformly high praise for trainers, the interviews highlighted more specific critiques. Some interviewees described the delivery as monotonous or overly technical, contrasting it with more dynamic and engaging trainers they had previously experienced. In customer feedback the experience regarding remote delivery was not overly positive but a few improvement suggestions were available. Interviewees were more vocal about the drawbacks of virtual training, particularly the lack of in-person interaction and its impact on engagement and discussion depth. Also, whereas the feedback survey answers suggested a stronger focus on tailoring content to specific professional roles, the theme was less prominent in the interviews. Instead, interviewees were more concerned with the overall clarity and accessibility of the content.

The interviews also provided several fresh insights on how to improve the course.

- **Group exercises:** interviewees valued the randomization of breakout groups, noting that it fostered diverse perspectives and enriched discussions.
- **Simplifying:** The interviews highlighted the need for trainers to simplify complex concepts and ensure participants from varied backgrounds could follow.
- **Pedagogical Style:** Participants in the interviews discussed the varying teaching styles of trainers, emphasizing the importance of engaging delivery methods. One participant suggested adding dynamic elements or a "wow factor" to maintain interest during training.
- **Material Accessibility:** The interviews detailed issues with the organization of digital materials on the learning platform (Priima) suggesting that the online learning platform should be rearranged more logically.
- **Preference for in-person learning:** While customer feedback briefly touched on hybrid options, the interviews strongly emphasized a preference for face-to-face learning, with some participants stating that in-person interactions significantly enhance engagement and learning outcomes.

In table 6 the results of the customer surveys and the interviews are compared and summarized. Column 2 lists the themes customers used to describe their experience. Column 3 highlights the themes from the interviews that differed from the surveys. In column 4 the positive customer experiences are refined and formulated into concise phrases or argumentations. These "key appeals" indicate what elements in the service delivered the customers perceived valuable answering the question "how" regarding service marketing (Grönroos 2016).

Table 6. Comparative analysis of customer feedback data and thematic interviews

Theme	Views confirmed	Differences in views	Key appeals (“how”)
Course content	<p>Comprehensiveness of the course content good.</p> <p>Focus on real-life examples valuable.</p> <p>Themes useful and applicable in practice.</p> <p>More in-depth views on some topics needed.</p>	<p>Interviewees did not explicitly mention tailoring content for specific roles whereas this topic was mentioned multiple times in the customer surveys.</p> <p>Interviewees stressed the clarity of content the breadth of topics covered.</p>	<p>Direct applicability</p> <p>Real-life examples</p> <p>Cross-industry insights</p> <p>Detailed overview</p>
Training material	<p>Clear and useful – also after the training.</p> <p>Inconsistency in language (mixing English and Finnish) criticized, particularly in subject-specific terminology.</p>	<p>No major differences in views.</p>	<p>Easy to follow material</p> <p>Materials for post-course reflection</p>
Practical relevance	<p>Applying learnings in one’s own work was seen useful.</p> <p>Group discussions enriching.</p> <p>Cross-industry collaboration valued.</p>	<p>No major differences in views.</p>	<p>Direct applicability</p> <p>Real-life examples</p> <p>Diverse viewpoints</p> <p>Cross-industry insights</p>

Trainer	<p>Expertise and deep knowledge evident.</p> <p>Ability to engage audience appreciated.</p> <p>More dynamic presentation style wanting.</p>	Interviewees compared the pedagogical styles of other trainers.	<p>Expert trainers</p> <p>Deep expertise</p>
Delivery	<p>Well-structured and organized remote delivery.</p> <p>Convenience.</p> <p>Virtual format hindered deeper discussions.</p>	<p>In the customer surveys hybrid options were occasionally suggested. Some interviewees saw virtual delivery as a compromise. Some also strongly preferred face-to-face interaction.</p> <p>A interviewee brought up the group exercises, specifically valuing the random division in breakout rooms.</p> <p>Learning Platform (Priima) mostly seen easy to use by all.</p>	<p>Interactive group exercises</p> <p>Structured and organized delivery</p> <p>Accessible to participants anywhere</p> <p>Dynamic breakout sessions to increase collaboration</p>
Pace	<p>Suitable.</p> <p>Slowing down required during more complex sections.</p>	Interviewees mentioned the importance of simplifying complex concepts. One mentioned the need to bridge the gap between trainer's expertise and the participants' understanding.	Time-efficient

## 4.2 How does service marketing align with customer interests

The purpose of the content analysis was to understand how the product is being presented to the customers. The analysis was structured in recurring themes that were identified in customer feedback analysis and thematic interviews. Identified potential overselling and any potential misalignment between the marketing narrative and the insights gathered from the customer surveys and customer interviews.

The data provides a structured overview of the marketing materials for the EFQM Foundation course across 16 materials, categorized by year, channels, visual and textual content, general marketing uses and wording used. Marketing materials were analyzed and compared against the key themes found in customer feedback analysis and interviews: direct applicability, training material, practical applications, trainer, delivery and pace. Finally, other potential highlights regarding service promises were identified. Analysis was one to uncover insights regarding customer-centric marketing, service marketing, and the evolution of marketing over a four-year span.

Email marketing was the most common marketing channel used with newsletters and ads being dominant formats. Most common channel was email marketing (9 instances), followed by e-commerce sites (3), company websites (2), LinkedIn (1), and other digital channels (1). The marketing material consisted predominantly of newsletters (6) and newsletter ads (3), with service/course descriptions (3), expert articles (2), social media posts (1), and display ads (1). Materials span from 2021 to 2024, with the following distribution: 3 materials from 2021, 4 materials from 2022, 5 materials from 2023 and 4 materials from 2024.

### 4.2.1 General observations on customer-centricity and service marketing

Most marketing materials emphasize organizational and personal development. Specific tailoring to customer segments appeared inconsistent. The materials use phrases like:

- “Enhance strategy development skills” (Material A)
- “Succeed in organizational transformation” (Material D)
- “Career advancement opportunities” (Material E)

These statements focus on outcomes and value, appealing to professional development but sometimes lack direct customer-centered language, such as addressing individual customer needs

or challenges explicitly. Direct applicability and real-world insights are present in some of the materials but not uniformly highlighted.

Visual content in marketing materials often include stock images of professional settings, with varying alignment to the service promise. For example, material A uses an image of strategy planning, partially aligning with the course theme whereas material B uses generic team meeting photos, which fail to underscore the unique value proposition. Over time, there is no consistent improvement in integrating visual elements with textual promises.

From 2021 to 2024, a slight evolution can be observed. Earlier materials (2021) focus more on technical details of the EFQM Foundation course. More recent materials (2024) incorporate career development and broader applicability, reflecting a shift towards functional benefits. However, these changes are not applied in all materials, and inconsistencies persist.

The focus in materials is mainly on technical aspects of the service, and answers more frequently to a question “what” dominate the materials. Marketing materials explain what EFQM model is, what organizations can do with it and communicates technical details of the training (e.g. where, when). Marketing messaging includes fewer examples of the functional aspects (“how”) of the course. Some of the newsletters (e.g. materials A and D) highlight the practical skills development and application within organizations. Customer testimonials used in some of the materials also describe “how” instead of “what”. Overall, it is evident from the results that marketing has focused on communicating what the service is and why it’s important, and much less puts emphasis on differentiating with how the service is delivered.

#### **4.2.2 Marketing materials vs. customer perceptions and experience**

Chapter 4.1 identified six themes and their sub-themes that customers considered relevant to their experience with EFQM Foundation course. Regarding course content, direct applicability and real-world examples are mentioned sporadically in marketing materials. Materials A and C effectively highlight cross-industry relevance, while others lack specific details on content adaptability. Most materials do not mention anything about the training materials nor the ease of following or availability of post-course resources. Practical applications are highlighted a bit more. Direct applicability is noted in a few instances (e.g., Material A), but materials often miss highlighting real-life applications, diverse viewpoints or cross-industry insights.

Trainers’ experience is mentioned in five marketing materials. In these occasions phrases typically highlight how long the trainer has worked with EFQM model (“has been using the EFQM model for more than 10 years”) or in general stating that the trainer has worked with organizational development (“worked in development, training and management in various businesses and

organizations"). Descriptions are typically quite generic, and for example trainers' credentials are rarely emphasized.

Regarding course delivery interactive features and structured delivery methods are rarely highlighted. Materials do not convey how the course structure benefits participants or what pedagogical methods are used to support learning. Pace of the course is mentioned twice in customer testimonial included in materials (marketing materials J and K).

In addition to the key elements identified in previous chapter, the marketing materials sporadically highlighted career progression opportunities and advanced learning opportunities. 10 out of 16 materials altogether mention the possibility to continue to advanced EFQM courses and 3 materials specifically focus on career paths ("all career paths start from the basics", "good start for your career path").

Figure 4 compares the marketing messaging and elements of the service most relevant to the customer (see chapter 4.1.3). It can be concluded that the value bringing elements in terms of service quality are relatively under-represented in marketing materials.

Key theme	Themes appealing to customers ("how")	How well marketing messages reflect customer perceptions?
Course content	Direct applicability	Yellow
	Real-life examples	Yellow
	Cross-industry insights	Red
	Detailed overview	Green
Training material	Easy to follow material	Red
	Materials for post-course reflection	Red
Practical relevance	Direct applicability	Yellow
	Real-life examples	Yellow
	Diverse viewpoints	Yellow
	Cross-industry insights	Red
Trainer	Expert trainers	Yellow
	Deep expertise	Red
Delivery	Interactive group exercises	Red
	Structured and organized delivery	Red
	Accessible to participants anywhere	Red
	Dynamic breakout sessions to increase collaboration	Red
Pace	Time-efficient	Red

Mentioned in materials 0-2 times  
 Mentioned in materials 3-6 times  
 Mentioned in materials more than 6 times

Figure 4. How well marketing aligns with customer perceptions

The marketing materials show a moderate alignment with customer-centric principles, particularly in emphasizing professional development outcomes. While the marketing materials touch upon some of the key themes appealing to customers, mainly detailed overview, direct applicability, real-life examples and diverse viewpoints, there are notable gaps. Marketing materials have limited or no emphasis on cross-industry insights, trainers, delivery or pace.

## 5 Discussion

In this chapter research questions are answered, suggestions for further development are discussed, as well as the trustworthiness of this study. Finally, the chapter concludes with reflections on own learning.

Excellence Finland offers training in EFQM model, which is a globally recognized management and organizational development framework. Between 2022-2024 all EFQM Foundation courses have been remote deliveries. Due to limited resources, Excellence Finland cannot compete on price or volume and seeks to enhance its marketing strategy to attract more customers without significant advertising expenses. Therefore, Excellence Finland aimed to find ways to make the marketing messaging more appealing to customers. The focus of this thesis was to understand the customer experience and perceptions regarding EFQM Foundation course, understand how well the marketing mirrors customer experience and to finally introduce ways to make the marketing of both EFQM Foundation course and of Excellence Finland in general more customer-centric.

The three research questions addressed in this thesis:

- How customers perceive Excellence Finland's EFQM Foundation course?
- How well does marketing messaging align with the interests of customers?
- How can the marketing messaging be improved to make it more appealing to potential customers?

### 5.1 Customer perceptions of the EFQM Foundation course

In this chapter I answer the first research question that examines how customers perceive Excellence Finland's EFQM Foundation course, what makes the training worth attending and what requires improvement. According to Yrjölä (2021) putting emphasis on understanding how customers perceive quality can guide marketers in designing and delivering superior customer experiences. Insights gained from qualitative research can help to create more effective and resonant marketing communications (Yrjölä 2021, p. 210-211). Therefore, to answer the first research questions it was vital to understand what information about customer experience is already available, what part of service is considered positive and where improvement is required. This helped to build a solid foundation of existing knowledge, identify gaps in the current research and recognize trends that helped design the subsequent stages of this study. To accomplish this, I reviewed existing customer feedback that had been systematically collected over the years.

Customer feedback was analyzed from EFQM Foundation courses organized between 15.2.2022-15.2.2024. In addition, 6 thematic interviews were conducted between February and March 2024 to increase understanding of customer perceptions.

The analysis revealed that participants generally view the service positively. The overall experience and satisfaction ratings were consistently high with most participants giving scores around 5 out of 6. Customers appreciated the course structure, relevance of the content, and practical applicability of the materials. Experiences were confirmed in the interviews where in more detail the participants mentioned group discussions, interactive breakout sessions, real-life examples and cross-industry insights as highly valuable. In customer feedback many frequently commended the trainer's expertise, the clarity of materials, and the smooth delivery in a virtual Teams environment. The interviewees agreed fully that the trainer was very professional and had deep expertise from the topic he was teaching. However, few constructive comments were given on the presentation delivery, and the materials mixing English and Finnish got criticism. The course content was praised for its comprehensiveness and relevance in the customer feedback and in the interviews the real-life examples were said to be particularly valuable. The materials were seen by many as well-organized and supportive of learning and participants were pleased to be able to utilize the materials also after the course. The trainer's deep expertise and engaging delivery were seen as significant strengths, enhancing the credibility and depth of the course.

Analysis of interviews and feedback revealed consistent themes but also highlighted areas for deeper exploration. Common suggestions included extending course duration, modernizing materials, increasing interaction during sessions. Customer feedback also cited improvement suggestions for tailored content to specific professional roles, including more practical case studies, and slightly adjusting the pacing during complex topics. They also proposed adding supplementary materials such as digital resources for further study and expanding the course promotion to reach a broader audience. While the virtual format was largely appreciated, some noted the inherent challenges of remote training and suggested exploring hybrid delivery options. The results resonate with Yrjölä's (2021) argument about moving away from inside-out approaches, for example by underscoring a need for tailored content in marketing materials.

Overall customer perceptions were positive. High satisfaction levels and a likelihood of recommending it to others were strong indicators of customer satisfaction. Grönroos's (2016) dual dimensions of service quality—technical and functional—were evident. While technical quality was strong, functional elements like delivery style and material presentation needed enhancement. Similarly, the customer perceptions seem to have been heavily influenced on both what is delivered (technical quality) and how it is delivered (functional quality). Customers found the course

practical, relevant and well-structured, and valued the knowledgeable trainer, practical relevance of the content, engaging delivery, well-organized materials, and the course's applicability to real-world professional settings.

## **5.2 Aligning customer perceptions with marketing messages**

This chapter examines and answers the second research question of this study: how well marketing messaging aligns with the interests of customers. I will discuss the two sub-questions: what type of messaging is used to market EFQM Foundation course and does marketing messaging align with the interests of customers?

Overpromising in marketing can harm perceived quality whereas accurate messaging and creating positive interactions with customers can help manage customer expectations. Misaligned marketing messages can undermine even well-executed service processes and negatively impact perceived quality. (Grönroos 2016, chapter 4.) The analysis of marketing materials for the EFQM Foundation course from 2021 to 2024 reveals a moderate alignment with what customers perceive as important. The messaging primarily emphasizes organizational and personal development, focusing on outcomes such as strategic skills, career advancement, and organizational transformation. However, it often lacks customer-centered language that directly addresses individual needs or challenges.

Good customer-centric content engages and adds value by helping the audience do something better or solve a specific problem (Holliman and Rowley 2014). Similarly, Müller and Christandl (2019) pointed out that good customer-centric content should be free of selling messages and instead should focus on the interests of consumers. In many marketing materials regarding the EFQM Foundation course the focus was indeed on solving a problem, highlighting outcomes that were assumed to interest customers (e.g. improved performance) and explaining why EFQM model should be seen as important. Any attempts to engage or interact with customers were on the other hand entirely lacking in marketing materials. It would be good to consider in the future whether adding more interactive messaging would help to appeal to potential customers.

Customer-relevant themes, such as the practical relevance of the content, the expertise of trainers, and structured delivery, are mentioned sporadically in marketing materials. For example, trainers' experience is often described generically, without emphasizing credentials or specific expertise. Additionally, interactive features, group exercises, and structured delivery methods are rarely discussed, and the pace of the course is mentioned only in customer testimonials. The availability

of training materials and resources for post-course applications, which are valued by customers, is notably absent from most marketing materials.

Grönroos (2016) noted that a company should focus on functional quality as a competitive differentiator while maintaining acceptable technical standards. Effective marketing should align with service delivery capabilities to ensure that promises are kept. The focus of this study was not on examining whether expectations of the service were met. However, the analysis of marketing material revealed clearly that the technical details of the course ("what") were overrepresented whereas marketing messaging rarely emphasized the functional aspects like practical applicability, interactive methods, or the trainer's specific expertise ("why"). Also, visual content in the materials frequently relies on generic stock images, with limited alignment to the course's unique value propositions. While there has been a slight shift over time toward highlighting broader benefits like career development, this evolution is inconsistent across materials. Marketing largely focuses on answering "what" the course is, with less emphasis on "how" it delivers value, leaving gaps in showcasing the course's real-world applications, diverse insights, and interactive features. From the service marketing point of view, we could therefore conclude that marketing messaging has not been primarily focused on differentiation. In a fiercely competitive market, it would be beneficial to consider creating messaging that focuses also on differentiation.

Based on the research it can be concluded that alignment with marketing messaging and customer experience is moderate or minor. Marketing focuses on technical aspects of the course, emphasizing "what" it is, with statements about organizational development, career progression, and the EFQM model's value. While marketing touches on professional development and some practical applications, it fails to consistently emphasize the direct applicability, interactive features, and trainer expertise that customers value. Critical aspects such cross-industry insights, deep expertise of the trainers and applicability in practice are underrepresented.

### **5.3 Development ideas for making marketing more customer-centric**

The third and final research question of this thesis examines, how the marketing messaging of Excellence Finland can be improved to make marketing more appealing to potential customers.

The study confirms Zeithaml et al.'s (2010) emphasis on internal marketing's importance in ensuring service delivery matches promises. The feedback highlights a need for better alignment between external marketing messages and the actual course experience.

Based on the results gathered from analyzing customer feedback, interviewing course participants and analyzing and comparing marketing material of the EFQM Foundation course to the customer experiences and perceptions, I recommend making four concrete improvements to make marketing more appealing to potential customers, differentiating the service and improving overall customer experience. All recommendations should be considered not just at the level of a single course, but at the level of the whole organization.

1. Refine marketing messages to include more functional elements of the service such as specific mentions of trainers' expertise, real-world examples, cross-industry insights, methods of delivery etc. Similar messaging should be used in all other communications and marketing of the organization's services, at least in terms of education and training services. These types of argumentations can help make marketing more customer-centric, differentiate the service and appeal more to potential customers.
2. Consider the importance of visuals in marketing. At their best, images can reinforce and diversify the service promise. They can both support the written text and bring new perspectives. On the other hand, misused images are meaningless, take up space and, at worst, send mixed messages to the customer. Images can be a strategically important way of communicating the quality of the service.
3. Update course materials in Finnish and use Finnish materials if the teaching language is Finnish. This ensures linguistic consistency and increases customer satisfaction. A similar approach would be wise to adopt throughout organization in all its trainings.
4. Revise course materials to make sure the presentation is clear and the wording simple enough. This can help the participants to follow also complex parts of the course.

In order to help align the marketing messages more towards customer-centric marketing, I created concrete examples on the ways marketing can be more about the how instead of what (table 7). The first column of Table 7 lists the main themes identified in step 1 of the research process (customer feedback analysis). The second column lists the main themes enriched after the thematic interviews in step 2 of the research process. In the last column of the table, I have formulated marketing messages that better align with customer perceptions based on the content analysis of the marketing materials from step 3 of the research process. The messaging is created based on the analyses and aims to accurately reflect the course's value. Choice of words and phrases are carefully crafted to reflect the strengths of the EFQM Foundation course as revealed in the analysis. They aim to balance authenticity and appeal, ensuring customers feel both attracted

to and confident in the course's value. It should be noted however that despite the attempt to draw content directly from research, these marketing messages are subjective views and are meant as an example rather than the only right way of communicating value.

Table 7. Examples of aligned marketing messaging

<b>Key theme</b>	<b>Appealing to customers (“how”)</b>	<b>Aligning marketing messages</b>
Course content	<p>Direct applicability</p> <p>Real-life examples</p> <p>Cross-industry insights</p> <p>Detailed overview</p>	<p>Comprehensive introduction to the EFQM model.</p> <p>A deep dive into proven frameworks for organizational excellence.</p> <p>Foundational knowledge for advanced certifications.</p> <p>Tailored content adaptable to different professional roles.</p>
Training material	<p>Easy to follow material</p> <p>Materials for post-course reflection</p>	<p>Well-organized and practical training materials.</p> <p>Resources you can revise and apply after the course.</p> <p>Clear and concise materials designed to support your success.</p> <p>Supplementary digital resources for deeper learning.</p>
Practical relevance	<p>Direct applicability</p> <p>Real-life examples</p> <p>Diverse viewpoints</p> <p>Cross-industry insights</p>	<p>Directly applicable to your work environment.</p> <p>Learn practical tools to improve your organization immediately.</p>

		<p>Real-world examples tailored to professional challenges.</p> <p>Cross-industry insights to broaden your perspective.</p> <p>Connect with professionals from various industries.</p> <p>Share insights and ideas with peers.</p> <p>Build valuable professional relationships during the course.</p> <p>Gain diverse perspectives to enrich your learning.</p>
Trainer	<p>Expert trainers</p> <p>Deep expertise</p>	<p>Learn from experienced and knowledgeable trainers.</p> <p>Expert guidance that makes complex concepts tangible.</p> <p>Trainers with concrete professional experience from multiple industries.</p> <p>Engaging and responsive teaching style.</p>
Delivery	<p>Interactive group exercises</p> <p>Structured and organized delivery</p> <p>Accessible to participants anywhere</p> <p>Dynamic breakout sessions to increase collaboration</p>	<p>Interactive group exercises that inspire collaboration.</p> <p>Dynamic breakout sessions for deeper discussions.</p> <p>A structured and organized approach for maximum learning.</p>

		<p>An engaging and professional learning environment.</p> <p>Convenient online delivery, accessible from anywhere.</p> <p>A seamless and well-structured online experience.</p>
Pace	Time-efficient	Time-efficient one-day training packed with value.

#### 5.4 Further research topics and development suggestions

In this research we have focused on the perceived customer experience and how well it is communicated in the marketing materials. If we use the service marketing triangle (Zeithaml et al. 2010) as a lens to examine the research, we have focused on bridging the communication gap between service delivery and customer expectations. Integrated service marketing communication ensures consistent messaging across various channels, including websites, personal sales, and mobile advertising. This has been our focus. Managing customer expectations throughout the service experience is crucial, especially when services change over time due to business realities or financial pressures (Zeithaml et al. 2010). However, we have only examined one side of the service marketing triangle. To ensure that what is promised through external marketing matches what is delivered and is supported by internal marketing activities, it would be good to examine also interactive marketing activities as well as internal marketing to make sure that the desired quality of the product can be obtained, also in the future.

Findings of the customer feedback analysis revealed that many participants expressed a high likelihood of recommending the training to colleagues. Many participants had even found out about the training from a colleague who had recommended the training. It would be useful to explore the possibility of spreading awareness of the course through customers. Referrals are both a cost-effective way of spreading awareness of the course and a persuasive marketing tool, as the word of a peer is often easier to believe than that of an organization. A few comments in the analysis suggested promoting the course more widely across different industries to enhance its reach and impact this could also be examined further.

On more specific research, I recommend the organization to explore the relevance of further education opportunities, career paths, certifications and international recognition to customers. These arguments were found in several marketing materials, more often than many other argumentations. No information is available on their actual importance to the customer. It is advisable to examine customer perceptions on these themes, as they are also currently frequently used in marketing.

Findings of this study also included areas where further development could enhance customer experience and satisfaction. I particularly recommend further examining the possibility of making tailored course content to specific needs or professional roles. Also adding more practical case studies, and slightly slowing the pace during complex topics could improve the experience. There was also an interest in further material that could be studied after the training.

The thematic interviews also revealed some development opportunities in relation to the trainer's presentation. Some customers felt that the trainer's enthusiasm and energy level were not high enough. Monotonous style was also mentioned as an area for improvement. As the trainer received excellent ratings overall from the customers, major challenges are unlikely to be an issue. I would therefore recommend that the company helps its trainer to develop as a performer. This could be done with the help of an external coach or, at its simplest, by practicing performances with colleagues - especially with the support of marketing and communications professionals. The training material could also be reviewed to see if it could be improved to help develop a more lively and multi-dimensional performance. After all, there were mentions about the material needing a more modern feel.

Finally, the customer feedback process in general may need further research and development. All customer feedback on the organization's courses is collected in a similar way to the customer feedback on the EFQM Foundation course used for the purpose of this study. All customer feedback is fragmented in individual Excel files. Customer feedback managed in this way does not serve the organization's development well. There are no tools or processes in place to view customer feedback trends and developments, either at the course level or at the organizational level. To improve an organization's understanding of the quality of its services, it would be advisable to analyze customer feedback for each course similar way as was done for the purpose of this study. It would be beneficial to find out what the level of customer satisfaction is for the various training courses, and where there is room for improvement. It may prove difficult to improve customer satisfaction at an organizational level without understanding the baseline situation. In addition, collecting customer feedback in individual files seems to be a cumbersome and slow process. It may be advisable therefore to redefine the whole process of collecting customer

feedback. The organization might be better served by a process where feedback is collected in one place per course and the evolution of customer experience can be systematically and easily monitored.

### **5.5 Reflection on the reliability, ethics and trustworthiness of the thesis**

The thesis provides actionable insights that align with Excellence Finland's goals, emphasizing customer-centric improvement. It advances understanding of marketing's role in perceived service quality in training context. The use of both qualitative and quantitative methods strengthens reliability. However, a 38% response rate in customer feedback surveys indicates potential bias. Also, the rush to conduct the thematic interviews before the theoretical framework was fully constructed may have affected how well the interview findings supported the research. Measures like anonymization of interviewees and informed consent ensured ethical compliance. The interviewees were not pressured to answer questions at any point. Recording and transcribing the interviews ensured that the answers have not been modified for the benefit of the survey.

As I work for a company that commissioned this thesis, bias is an important issue to consider. To ensure as objective a review of the data as possible, all data analyzed were extracted into structured tables and each material analyzed based on the same criteria. The use of AI for the initial analysis of the data also helped to avoid bias. To ensure ethical use of the AI, I complied with the Haaga–Helia's Guidelines for the Use of Artificial Intelligence (Appendix 5).

The main bias in terms of reliability and sufficiency relates to the interview responses. Many interviewees were very brief in their responses. I'm an experienced interviewer and know from my experience that with the interview script used for these interviews, the duration of the interview typically lasts at least 25 minutes. In this case the average duration of the interview was 14 minutes. The interviewees seemed to avoid answering questions which required identifying areas for improvement or making specific suggestions for improvement. Questions about the trainer, his training style and methods seemed particularly challenging.

I knew the questions could be difficult and the fact that a representative of the organizations was asking the questions could limit the answers. Therefore, I had prepared for this while planning the interviews. I started all the interviews with casual chat to create a relaxed atmosphere. I made clear in the beginning of each interview that all answers would be treated as anonymous and tried lowering the barriers to answer by telling each interviewee that honest and straightforward answers would be the most helpful in terms of improving customer experience. During interviews I made sure to give enough time after each question for interviewees to ponder their answers and did not

rush them, and I had additional aiding questions prepared. Still, interviewees were not very elaborate.

It's impossible to say why the answers were kept so short. It's possible some of the questions should have been even more particular. It's also possible that the interviewees simply did not have more ideas for improvement than the ones they expressed. The interviewees could also have felt it impolite to give too many improvement ideas as it could be seen as criticizing the organization or the trainer. In the latter case having someone outside the organization to conduct the interviews could have helped the situation. This should be taken into consideration in the future interview rounds.

## **5.6 Reflection on own learning process**

My learning process during this case study has been intensive and multifaceted, encompassing theoretical study, research design, data analysis, and the practical application of findings. This study, which combined quantitative data analysis, qualitative research, and content analysis, required a broad range of skills and continuous self-reflection.

In the early stages of the research, I first immersed myself in the practical applications of the thesis. I started creating material for analyses, though the theory behind case study methodology and the research methods were not yet fully formulated. This was mainly due to pressure regarding the customer interviews schedules as they needed to be done shortly after they had taken part in the course. Initially, combining analysis with theoretical framework felt challenging, particularly in understanding their compatibility. However, through theoretical literature, such as Grönroos (2016) and Hirsjärvi & Hurme (2022), and feedback from my advisor, I began to see how these methods complement each other. I discovered that an increasing understanding of theory not only formed the foundation of my research but also helped justify my methodological choices and interpret data coherently. For example, the use of content analysis enabled me to add depth and context to the results derived from analysis of customer feedback data.

Planning the research process was an important phase in my learning journey. Finding the most suitable research design proved a lot of work. Despite careful planning, I encountered practical challenges, such as scheduling issues during writing process. I also reflected on how my prior experiences and potential biases could influence the outcome of the analysis. This was particularly challenging as I work for the commissioning company and know their current marketing processes. A significant learning experience was also the need to address ethical considerations, particularly when utilizing AI to help analyze datasets.

The practical application of the research and the value it provided to the commissioning company were among the most significant outcomes of my learning process. For example, the findings revealed that the client's current processes did not fully meet the needs of their internal processes. I strongly believe that these findings will further help the company to deliver better quality service in the future.

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## Appendices

### Appendix 1. AI prompt for content analysis

Objective:

I am conducting a thematic analysis of customer feedback for one course. I will soon provide you with the material, but I will first give you instructions and context. My goal is to understand 1) what type of customer feedback the training has received, 2) how good the customer experience is, 3) what the customers have found good / important / interesting, 4) what improvement suggestions the customers have made and 5) any other conclusions that can be drawn from the feedback received.

About the material to be analyzed:

The dataset includes feedback from 25 different course participants. All feedback is organized under various themes formatted in Excel spreadsheets. All relevant data can be found on sheet 2 of each Excel spreadsheet. There are 9 different Excel files, each has the same structure, but the feedback data is different. The Excel is structured with multiple sheets, the sheet number 2 is the one you should focus on. The sheet number 2 includes columns for each question. The sheet number 2 includes different numbers of rows, one row always including all answers of one individual participant. All excel files are attached.

Task:

Provide me with an extensive summary of all answers followed by an analysis of the customer feedback organized by themes. To do this, organize and analyze all 25 responses based on each separate question presented in columns. Review each sheet number 2, ensuring that all answers are analyzed. Identify similarities and opposing views on the matter. Make sure all answers are analyzed. Strict adherence to the provided data is important: use only the data provided, strictly adhering to the text, data and context given without extrapolating beyond the provided information. Avoid overgeneralization and exaggeration: do not make assumptions or generate findings that extend beyond the explicit content of the provided answers and respondent information. The length of your answer does not matter. Provide the analysis in text format.

## **Appendix 2. Outline of the interview**

All interviews were conducted in Finnish. This is a translation of the original interview framework.

### **Name of interviewee, organization and date**

*You participated in the EFQM Fundamentals training on 15.2.2024. We want to continuously improve our services, and therefore I asked you separately for a short in-depth interview about your own experiences with the EFQM Foundations training.*

*First of all, just to check, is it ok if I record the interview to check your interview notes and to support the development work? Great, I'll start recording now.*

*The interview is conducted confidentially, and the answers are anonymized. The responses will be used to improve our customer experience and training activities. I will use this interview to support writing my thesis.*

*There are no right or wrong answers. I am interested to hear your genuine views and experiences regarding the EFQM Foundation course. The more honest and direct your answers, the more helpful they are for us as we wish to improve. Let's get started.*

1. You attended the EFQM Foundation course on 15.2. What was your overall impression?
2. Were you familiar with the EFQM model before?
3. What did you find most useful in the training? (What insights or lessons did you learn?)
4. What could we have done differently in the training to make your experience (even) better?
5. After completing the training, would you consider further training on the topic?

*I have a few specific questions related to different aspects of the training. We will go through these as time permits.*

6. Was our coach inspiring?
7. Did you find the coach knowledgeable? (did you think he knew the subject he was teaching)
8. What could the trainer have done differently to make the training experience better for you?
9. Was the material presented at the training clear?
10. Was there anything in the material presented or distributed that you felt did not work well?
11. How did you find the delivery of the training as it was conducted via Teams?
12. How could we improve our Teams trainings to make them more convenient for you?
13. Was the training worth your time?

14. Our training platform is Priima. How did you find using Priima?
15. Was the guidance before and after the training clear?
16. Was the communication about the training in general clear?
17. Have you attended other training courses with us? Which ones?
18. Any other feedback or comments?

*Thank you very much for taking the time to talk to me. If there's anything I can be of help with, just drop me an email.*

### **Appendix 3. Prompt for analyzing interviews**

A transcript of 6 interviews is attached. There may be some spelling mistakes, but don't worry about it.

Task: write me an analysis based on the interviews. Divide the analysis into two parts

1. What is the experience of EFQM participants with EFQM Foundation course? Are the interviewees satisfied with the training? What about the trainer? What about the training material? What conclusions can be drawn about the overall customer experience of the training?

2. Are there any comments from the interviews on what Excellence Finland (the training provider) could do to make the EFQM Foundation course more attractive? How could we attract more participants? How should the course be changed to make it better?

#### **Appendix 4. Prompt for comparative analysis**

Objective:

I am conducting a thematic analysis of customer feedback for one course. I will soon provide you with additional material, but I will first give you instructions and context. There are two sets of material: 1) the transcribed 6 interview documents I have already given you and 2) analysis of customer feedback which I will provide you in a moment. The analysis of customer feedback was done first, and the interviews after that. My goal is to deepen my understanding of customer experiences by understanding 1) what similarities there are in the experiences and perceptions between the interviewees (transcribed 6 documents) and customers who gave their feedback earlier (material to follow) , 2) what differences there are in the experiences and perceptions of the interviewees and customer feedback, 3) what new point of views the interviewees had that are not included in the customer feedback.

About the material to be analyzed:

The dataset includes 6 transcribed documents from interviews and a summary of customer feedback collected earlier (the summary you will find at the end of this prompt). Customer feedback is organized under 6 themes: course content, training material, practical relevance, trainer, delivery and pace. The transcribed documents are organized based on semi-structured interviews that partly include same themes as the customer analysis.

Task:

Provide me with an extensive comparison of the two datasets. Separate between 1) what similarities there are in the experiences and perceptions between the interviewees (transcribed 6 documents) and customers who gave their feedback earlier (material to follow) , 2) what differences there are in the experiences and perceptions of the interviewees and customer feedback, 3) what new point of views the interviewees had that are not included in the customer feedback. To do this, organize and analyze between two datasets clearly indicating which data comes from interviews and which from the customer feedback summary. Identify similarities and opposing views on the matter. Make sure all answers are analyzed. Strict adherence to the provided data is important: use only the data provided, strictly adhering to the text, data and context given without extrapolating beyond the provided information. Avoid overgeneralization and exaggeration: do not make assumptions or generate findings that extend beyond the explicit content of the provided answers and respondent information. The length of your answer does not matter. Provide the analysis in text format.

## **Appendix 5. Use of AI according to Haaga-Helia AI Usage Guidelines**

This thesis complies with Haaga–Helia's Guidelines for the Use of Artificial Intelligence updated 17.9.2024. The guidelines were used as follows:

1. Purposeful and Supportive Use: AI tools were used to support various aspects of the research and writing process, such as summarizing content, spell checking, identifying links between various content and improving text clarity.
2. Student Responsibility: I take responsibility for the final content, ensuring all AI generated content was reviewed and refined by me.
3. Text checking: AI was used to check grammatical accuracy and format my own text.
4. Disclosure: I have disclosed how each AI tool was used in this thesis.
5. Respecting Privacy: All interview data was anonymized before analysis, respecting privacy guidelines.
6. Following Instructions: I did not receive any explicit instructions from my supervisors restricting AI use. Therefore, I adhered to the general guidelines from 2023 provided by Haaga–Helia.
7. Avoiding Unverified Claims: I ensured all AI assisted content was reviewed for accuracy and reliability.