

SAVONIA

University of Applied Sciences

THESIS – BACHELOR'S DEGREE PROGRAMME
SOCIAL SCIENCES, BUSINESS AND ADMINISTRATION

STUDY ON EFFECTIVE CUSTOMER SERVICE PRACTICES FOR BUSINESS GROWTH

Case: The Sauna Heater Company

AUTHOR Noah Choate

Field of Study Social Sciences, Business and Administration	
Degree Programme Degree Programme in International Business	
Author(s) Noah Choate	
Title of Thesis Study on Effective Customer Service Practices for Business Growth	
Date 3/5/2025	Pages/Number of appendices 19
Client Organisation /Partners The Sauna Heater Company	
<p>The objective of this thesis was to identify and recommend effective customer service practices for businesses operating in niche markets, with a specific focus on a U.S.-based sauna company. The aim was to explore ways in which small businesses can enhance customer satisfaction, build loyalty, and compete in a growing wellness-driven market.</p> <p>To gather data, qualitative research methods were applied. The primary method was a semi-structured email interview conducted with the founder of the case company, who provided expert insights into customer service challenges and knowledge about the sauna industry. A thematic analysis was done to code themes of data within the interview to help find the main findings. The study also incorporated a literature review on customer service practices, customer service processes, customer service experiences, and cultural perceptions of sauna use in Finland and the United States. The theoretical framework helped guide both the research design and the interpretation of the findings.</p> <p>The results indicate that companies in niche markets like the sauna heater company benefit significantly from personalized, considerate customer service and a strong understanding of their target audience. Key findings include the importance of customer relationship management (CRM) systems and standard operating blueprints (SOB's) to help organize customer data and automate customer follow-ups. Another key finding is the need for a streamlined system that combines multiple communication channels (email, phone, chat, etc.) Finally, clear and proactive communication when handling customers' expectations or complaints is important for reducing misunderstanding and overall leads to improved customer service. The findings suggest that combining traditional customer service values with modern communication technologies improves customer retention and strengthens brand loyalty.</p>	
Keywords Customer Service, Target Market, Service Channels, Service Processes, Service Experience, Sauna	

CONTENTS

1	INTRODUCTION	4
2	CUSTOMER SERVICE.....	5
2.1	Different Customer Service Channels.....	6
2.2	Customer Services Process	6
2.3	Customer Experience Process and Strategies Improving Customer Service Experience	7
2.4	Target Market.....	7
3	CASE: THE SAUNA HEATER COMPANY.....	9
3.1	Finnish Sauna Background.....	9
3.2	Sauna Etiquette	9
3.3	American Target Market for Saunas	10
3.4	Americans' Attitudes Towards Nudity and Bathing Together During Sauna Use.....	11
3.5	Blending Finnish Sauna Culture with the American Market via Customer Service	11
4	RESEARCH PROCESS ON THE SAUNA HEATER COMPANY.....	12
4.1	Qualitative Research	12
4.2	Research Methods	12
4.3	Description of The Research Process.....	13
5	RESULTS FOR THE SAUNA HEATER COMPANY.....	14
5.1	Thematic Analysis of The Email Interview.....	14
5.2	Connecting Interview Insights with Customer Service Theory	15
6	CONCLUSION, RECOMMENDATIONS, AND FURTHER RESEARCH DIRECTIONS.....	16
6.1	Practical Recommendations	16
6.2	Further Research Directions.....	16
7	DISCUSSION AND RELIABILITY OF RESEARCH	17
	REFERENCES	19

LIST OF FIGURES

Figure 1. Sauna Market Size, Share, Growth, Trends, Industry Analysts Forecast 2028

1 INTRODUCTION

For businesses, it is crucial not only to provide excellent customer service but also to thoroughly understand their customers. Many companies lose opportunities because they fail to meet the increasing expectations of their clients. However, with effective customer service strategies in place, businesses can transform challenges into opportunities for growth and customer retention (Shulzhenko, 2025).

The topic for this thesis arose partly from the author's own experiences working as a customer servant at the Case Company: The Sauna Heater Advising customers on selecting suitable heaters for their saunas and answering customer emails and phone calls, assisting them with their shipments, deliveries, and installations of the products. At the Case Company, a focus was placed on finding ways to provide excellent customer service quality and how to best service the American target market group for saunas and sauna heaters.

The Sauna Heater is a company that sells Finnish saunas and sauna heaters to the American Market online. The company offers a diverse range of heating solutions including electric, wood-burning, and infrared sauna heaters, each designed to deliver efficient, reliable, and safe performance. They use their website thesaunaheater.com to sell their products and use social media platforms such as YouTube, Instagram, TikTok, and X to attract and acquire customers. (The Sauna Heater, 2025) The company is focused on providing excellent customer service, including guidance on product selection, installation support, and customer care to guarantee full customer satisfaction (The Sauna Heater, 2025).

The significance of this study lies in the focus on providing effective customer service quality within the sauna industry in the United States. As the sauna industry grows rapidly and more people become interested in wellness and relaxation in the U.S. and as competition increases, having great customer service becomes the key differentiator that can influence purchasing decisions, customer satisfaction, and long-term brand loyalty (Harman Sport, 2025). Understanding how to deliver responsive, knowledgeable, and personalized support can directly impact a sauna company's ability to retain customers and generate repeat business. This study highlights how effective customer service can turn one-time buyers into loyal brand advocates. By improving the customer experience, the sauna heater company may increase revenue but also establish a strong reputation in a market that values trust, comfort, and reliability.

2 CUSTOMER SERVICE

Service refers to the act of helping others, offering support, or providing assistance. In the context of customer service, it involves engaging with clients while demonstrating strong communication and emotional intelligence. It requires applying relevant knowledge and skills to tailor a company's offerings to suit individual customer preferences. The role of customer service is becoming increasingly important in service-based industries. As consumers gain greater awareness of available choices and as competition drives higher service standards, customer expectations are also rising. (Zeithaml, Bitner, & Gremler, 2017.)

Customer service refers to the support and help a company provides to their clients. The main goal is to ensure customers feel satisfied, receive high-quality and efficient service, and believe that the assistance is both professional and personalized (Grant, 2024). Delivering excellent customer service is crucial for fostering customer loyalty and supporting business growth. Since customer service often occurs in real-time, requiring direct interaction between staff and customers, the quality of these encounters plays a vital role in shaping the overall customer experience (Zeithaml et al. 2017). A customer's perception is largely influenced by how they feel and interpret their service experience, making empathy and the ability to see things from the customer's perspective one of the most important skills in this field (Zeithaml et al. 2017). To attract and retain customers, businesses must present a relatable and approachable image. Any employee who interacts directly with customers—whether face-to-face, by phone, email, or online—becomes the “face” of the company and directly shapes how the organization is perceived. (Zeithaml et al. 2017.)

Customer service plays a crucial role in the overall success of a business. Services are typically intangible and occur in real-time, meaning they are produced and consumed simultaneously. During these interactions, the exchange between the customer and the service provider significantly influences the customer's perception of service quality. Consumers often place high importance on these personal interactions. As a result, every point of contact with an organization gives the customer a chance to form an impression of the service they receive (Bitca, 2024). One key way to evaluate customer service is by assessing how effectively it meets or exceeds the customer's needs and expectations. (Bitca, 2024.)

The quality of customer service is ultimately judged by the customer based on their perception of how well the service was delivered. Initial experiences tend to shape a customer's early impressions of service quality, while repeated interactions allow for more accurate evaluations. Bitca (2024) defines service quality as the degree to which the delivered service meets or exceeds customer expectations. Grönroos (2000) explains that a customer's perception of service quality consists of two main components: technical quality, which relates to the outcome of the service, and functional quality, which pertains to the process of service delivery. Technical quality refers to the end result the customer receives, such as the solution or outcome after interacting with customer service. However, since most customers engage with a company more than once, the outcome alone does not fully determine their overall view of service quality. Functional quality—the manner in which the service is provided and the customer's experience during the interaction—also significantly shapes their perception. (Grönroos, 2000).

2.1 Different Customer Service Channels

There are numerous customer service channels that businesses can use to help their customers reach them and in today's world, it has become even easier because of social media. Here are some of the most common customer service channels companies can use.

Phone calls are still one of the most widely used methods for customers to reach out to businesses for help or information (Guanzon, 2024). However, with advancements in technology, especially artificial intelligence, many companies now offer self-service tools like chatbots on their websites. These tools allow customers to get quick answers and help reduce the volume of direct inquiries, saving both time and resources for businesses (Guanzon, 2024). Another increasingly popular support option is live chat, typically accessible through a company's website. This tool is often used when self-service doesn't fully resolve the issue, offering a quicker and more personalized interaction than a phone call (Guanzon, 2024).

Social media has also emerged as a vital communication channel. Being active on multiple platforms gives businesses more visibility and allows customers to connect through their preferred apps, often attracting new potential buyers (Guanzon, 2024). Additionally, SMS or text messaging has become a convenient way for customers to reach out, offering fast and flexible communication without the need for a call (Guanzon, 2024). For more complex purchases, especially high-value items, video calls are becoming a useful tool. They allow customer service representatives to answer questions face-to-face, providing a more personalized and trustworthy experience (Guanzon, 2024). Finally, email continues to be a standard channel for customer support. It is useful for maintaining a written record of conversations, but unlike other methods, email responses can take longer (Guanzon, 2024).

2.2 Customer Services Process

A customer service process is a structured and repeatable strategy to handle customer service inquiries and complaints effectively, which results in smooth customer service operations and improved customer service satisfaction. It provides a clear, step-by-step framework that guides customer service agents in handling various situations, eliminating confusion, and ensuring clear communication with customers. When customer servants are provided with such a structure, they can deliver reliable and efficient service that builds lasting customer loyalty (Suresh, 2024).

The typical customer service call process, the interaction begins with the customer servant greeting the caller in a friendly and professional manner, introducing themselves, and establishing a positive rapport. The customer servant then will proceed to gather information by actively listening to the customer's issue, asking relevant questions to clarify the concern, and confirming the caller's identity to ensure personalized service. Once the issue is clearly understood, the customer servant then provides a practical solution on the spot or if the matter escalates will be sent to the appropriate team or department if further action is required. Finally, the customer servant checks whether the issue has been successfully resolved, offers additional support if needed, requests feedback on the service experience, and concludes the call by thanking the customer for their time and patience. (Suresh, 2024).

A well-defined process like this breaks down the customer service interaction into clear stages and performance metrics giving customer servants a structured approach to enhance customer service quality. (Suresh, 2024).

2.3 Customer Experience Process and Strategies Improving Customer Service Experience

Understanding the customer experience (CX) process is essential for businesses aiming to improve customer satisfaction and loyalty. The CX process provides the entire journey a customer goes through with a brand, from initial awareness to post-purchase engagement (Miels, 2024).

Here is an example of how the CX Process goes, the customer experience journey typically begins with the awareness stage, where the customer's attention is captured through marketing, social media, or word-of-mouth, creating the all-important first impression. This is followed by the consideration stage, where potential customers evaluate the brand's offerings, compare alternatives, and seek relevant information to make informed decisions, making it essential for businesses to provide clear and accessible content. The next phase is the purchase, where a smooth and user-friendly buying process can significantly influence conversion rates. Post-purchase engagement is crucial for maintaining the relationship, as continued communication, customer support, and feedback collection help build trust and encourage loyalty. Finally, in the advocacy stage, satisfied customers become promoters of the brand, sharing positive experiences and influencing others' decisions—a powerful form of organic marketing that businesses should actively support and encourage. (Miels, 2024)

In a fast-moving and competitive market, delivering exceptional customer experiences is vital for retaining customers (Miels, 2024). To improve customer service, organizations should build a culture centered around the customer, ensuring that all staff prioritize customer satisfaction during every interaction. Consistently collecting and utilizing customer feedback is important for identifying what works well and what needs improvement, helping businesses adjust their services to better meet customer expectations. Additionally, mapping the customer experience journey provides a clear overview of each touchpoint, making it easier to spot problem areas and opportunities for improvement. By carefully examining and refining every step of the customer's experience, companies can strengthen relationships, boost loyalty, and encourage sustainable growth. (Miels, 2024).

2.4 Target Market

A target market refers to a specific group of individuals who are considered potential customers based on shared traits such as age, income level, and lifestyle. Identifying a business's target market is a critical step in creating and executing an effective marketing strategy (Team I, 2024). Marketers typically segment consumers into four main categories: socio-demographic, geographic, psychographic, and behavioral. Socio-demographic segmentation focuses on core characteristics like age, income, and homeownership. For instance, saunas are often marketed to adults aged 30–65 from middle to upper-income households who own their homes, as they are more likely to value wellness and afford such installations. Geographic segmentation takes location into account, with higher interest in saunas typically seen in urban and suburban areas in colder climates such as the

Midwest and Northeast. Psychographic segmentation targets individuals based on values and lifestyles—such as health-focused consumers or professionals seeking relaxation. Behavioral segmentation analyzes customer actions and motivations, such as purchasing for health, luxury, or long-term benefits. Since many buyers research thoroughly before making a decision, offering promotions or discounts can help accelerate the buying process. (Colas, 2024.)

Identifying and understanding the target market is critical for any business. By dividing the market into socio-demographic, geographic, physiographic, and behavioral segments, companies can tailor their strategies to meet the specific needs and preferences of their customers. (Colas, 2024).

3 CASE: THE SAUNA HEATER COMPANY

The sauna heater company is a business from Finland that offers a diverse range of heating solutions for your sauna including electric, wood burning, and infrared sauna heater heaters, each designed to deliver efficient, reliable, and safe performance. Electric sauna heaters are available in both wall-mounted and floor-standing models and often include modern features such as digital controls, programmable timers, and Wi-Fi connectivity. Wood-burning heaters, on the other hand, cater to customers seeking an authentic and traditional sauna experience, particularly in off-grid or rural settings. Infrared heaters provide therapeutic benefits through direct body heating and are commonly used in indoor wellness spaces. In addition to core heating products, the company supplies a full range of sauna accessories such as sauna stones, ladles, buckets, thermometers, lighting systems, and control panels. (The Sauna Heater, 2025.)

The sauna heater company is focused on providing excellent customer service for their customers and has customer service representatives who work to answer customer questions through phone calls and emails as well as blogs written by sauna experts and YouTube videos for customers who need assistance with their sauna questions. (The Sauna Heater, 2025.)

3.1 Finnish Sauna Background

The sauna holds deep cultural significance in Finland, where it originated thousands of years ago. It plays a vital role in helping people endure the country's long, harsh winters. Today, Finland has over two million saunas—remarkable for a nation of just 5.5 million people. Nearly every home, apartment, and cottage in the country includes a sauna (Kiia, 2024).

The main two types of saunas that people tend to use are the traditional wooden sauna and the electric sauna. The traditional wooden sauna is more likely to be found in cottages as it takes a little work on your end to heat the sauna because you need to chop wood, start a fire, and wait about 45 minutes for the sauna to heat up. With the electric sauna, you just flip a switch, and it takes about 45 minutes to be ready. These electric saunas are typically found in apartments and houses. (Kiia, 2024).

The Finnish sauna is a tradition enjoyed by people across all age groups, combining cultural heritage, health benefits, and social interaction. It continues to be an important aspect of Finland's national identity. Saunas are known to promote relaxation, reduce stress, and relieve muscle soreness, while also enhancing sleep quality. The sweating process during a sauna helps cleanse the skin and remove toxins from the body. Additionally, many people alternate sauna sessions with cold plunges, which have been shown to improve mood, lower blood pressure, decrease stress levels, and support overall health. (Kiia, 2024).

3.2 Sauna Etiquette

After heating up your sauna, it is time to dive in and feel relaxed and rejuvenated. The traditional Finnish way to go into a sauna is with nothing on. You will sweat in the sauna, and it will be humid so wearing any clothes might make it uncomfortable but check the rules first if you go to a public sauna or mixed-gender sauna because you do not want to break the rules. The next best thing to

do is just put a towel around yourself. (The Sauna Heater, 2025). You should also shower before and after going into the sauna, you want to be clean before and after because you do not want any bacteria or germs getting in there. Electronics should also be left outside the sauna because the sauna is a place for relaxation and your electronics could also get messed up due to the moisture in the air. (The Sauna Heater, 2025).

The sauna is a place for relaxation so being loud and obnoxious in the sauna is not a place for that, however it is okay to speak in a toned-down manner rather than a normal conversation. You should remember these rules when going to a public sauna because there will be people you might not know and should be respectful. In your own sauna you may do whatever you like. Throwing water on the rocks is recommended and usually a must when trying to achieve the traditional sauna experience. (The Sauna Heater, 2025.)

3.3 American Target Market for Saunas

The author being half-American and growing up in the U.S. has a pretty good understanding of how people's purchase behavior is in America. A recent study from (Deloitte Insights, 2019) found that customers consider product price, product availability, and shopping convenience but getting a great deal on a product is what matters to American consumers above everything else.

Saunas were first introduced to North America around 1638 by Finnish and Swedish settlers. Since that time, the use of saunas especially those with electric stoves has grown significantly in popularity across the United States. Increasing awareness of the health and wellness benefits associated with sauna use has contributed to a steady rise in the number of saunas installed in private homes (Heeringa, 2018).

Saunas are experiencing rising popularity in the United States as more consumers prioritize health and wellness. According to Technavio (2024), the U.S. sauna market is projected to grow by \$13.6 million, with a compound annual growth rate (CAGR) of 4.3% between 2023 and 2028. This upward trend reflects a growing interest in personal well-being and has led to a significant increase in the installation of home saunas. As shown in Figure 1, the market outlook for saunas in the U.S. demonstrates steady, year-over-year growth throughout the 2018–2028 period. (Technavio, 2024).

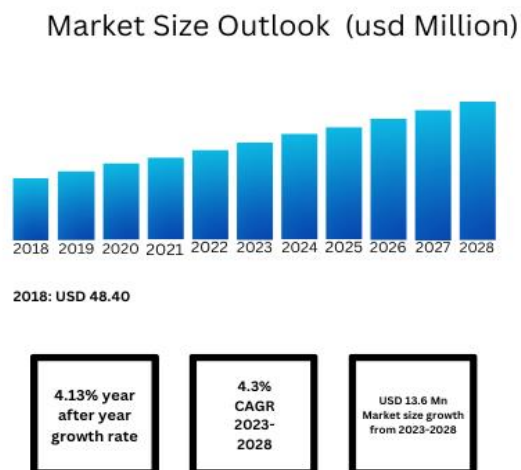


Figure 1. Sauna Market Size, Share, Growth, Trends, Industry Analysts Forecast 2028 (Technavio 2024)

3.4 Americans' Attitudes Towards Nudity and Bathing Together During Sauna Use

In Finland, where sauna culture embraces communal nudity as a norm, attitudes in the United States tend to be more reserved. In American wellness environments, such as gyms and spas, there is often an expectation for individuals to wear swimsuits or cover up with towels while using saunas. On the other hand, in Finland, nudity in saunas is completely natural and seen as important for both cleanliness and comfort. It is common for people to share sauna sessions with family and friends without clothing, as the sauna is regarded as a place of relaxation and equality in Finnish culture. (Sauna Journal, 2025.)

The difference in practices emphasizes the importance of cultural awareness. For Americans, coming to Finland to sauna may require adjusting to different sauna norms regarding nudity and bathing with others. On the other hand, Finnish visitors to American saunas should be mindful of local expectations for attire and privacy. Understanding and respecting these cultural differences can enhance the sauna experience for all participants. (Sauna Journal, 2025.)

3.5 Blending Finnish Sauna Culture with the American Market via Customer Service

As Finnish sauna traditions continue to grow in America and the demand for more and more saunas comes, sauna companies need to combine good customer service as well as being educated on saunas, how they work, and their target market. More people in America are wanting to purchase and build saunas because of the relaxation and health benefits that the sauna provides, but many are unsure where to start the process of building one. That is why in the research the author will be using the qualitative research method to conduct interviews with the founder of a sauna company and a customer representative in the sauna business to find out what they are doing to help people in America gain knowledge on saunas and grow the Finnish sauna culture in America as well as providing top-notch service to its customers.

4 RESEARCH PROCESS ON THE SAUNA HEATER COMPANY

The aim of this thesis is to identify effective customer service strategies for businesses operating within small niche markets, such as the case company, and to offer practical recommendations for service improvement. Given that the author was employed at the case company and considering the nature of the research, qualitative methods were deemed most appropriate. Specifically, an interview was conducted with the company's founder, who is recognized as an expert in the field. This chapter begins by explaining the concept of qualitative research, followed by an overview of the selected research methods and a description of the research process.

4.1 Qualitative Research

Qualitative research is used to explore and understand individuals' behaviors, perspectives, and experiences. It emphasizes the collection of non-numerical data, such as interviews and observations, to gain deeper insights. Unlike quantitative research, which focuses on measuring variables—for instance, the percentage of American consumers who use saunas—qualitative research produces descriptive data, often in the form of words. The primary distinctions between qualitative and quantitative approaches lie in the difference of the questions posed, the type of data collected, and the methods used for data gathering. (Patton, 2023.)

Patton (2023) highlights that the main goal of qualitative research methods is to gain a deeper understanding of individuals' experiences, attitudes, and perspectives. These methods focus on exploring the "how," "why," and "what" of a particular phenomenon, seeking to uncover the underlying meanings and motivations behind human behavior. Qualitative research is especially suited to examining topics such as personal lived experiences, diverse viewpoints, and the impact of life circumstances on attitudes and actions. In contrast to quantitative approaches, which prioritize the measurement and analysis of numerical data, qualitative methods emphasize context, depth, and subjectivity, providing deeper insights into the complexities of human behavior and social interactions. (Patton, 2023).

4.2 Research Methods

This thesis applied a semi-structured email interview to collect detailed qualitative data on how customer service representatives can enhance their effectiveness in customer service, as well as to gain insights into the American sauna market.

Interviews serve as an essential technique in qualitative research and can be categorized into three types: structured, unstructured, and semi-structured. Structured interviews involve a fixed set of questions, similar to surveys, whereas unstructured interviews are more open and conversational, allowing for spontaneous discussion. Semi-structured interviews blend these approaches by using a guided list of open-ended questions, giving the interviewer flexibility to explore topics more deeply based on the participant's responses. (Delve, 2024.)

Face-to-face interviews are often seen as a more traditional way of doing interviews but choosing to do an email interview was seen as the best way to conduct the interview because emailing is very common nowadays and emailing allows the participants to be able to answer the questions when it

is convenient for him or her and possible disturbing background noises, that could disturb the interview, are not recorded. However, there can be disadvantages of email interviewing. Email interviews lack social cues, for example, nonverbal communication that are present in face-to-face interviews. Also, email interviews might be quite time-consuming as it can take time for the interviewee to answer the questions. Comparing the advantages and disadvantages of email interviewing and face-to-face interviewing could be recommended when evaluating the possibility of conducting an email interview. (Bowden & Gonzalez, 2015).

4.3 Description of The Research Process

The objective of this thesis is to focus on effective customer service qualities in the U.S. for the case company: The sauna heater. The study was done by doing a semi-structured email interview and an interview guide, which included 6 questions that were prepared beforehand (appendix 1) and sent to the founder of the case company. Then taking those answers from the interview and doing a thematic analysis to uncover key insights on how Finnish sauna companies can optimize their customer service in the American market and use effective customer service qualities. The founder of the case company received the interview questions on Wednesday, 29.1.2025. The author received their final answers on 3.2.2025. The purpose of this interview was to provide the author with knowledge and strategies of customer service in the U.S. sauna market.

After receiving the answers from the email interview, the author then used thematic analysis, which is a qualitative research method used to identify and analyze themes within the data. The first step to thematic analysis is familiarization with the data. This step involves reviewing responses from the interview to identify key points related to customer service and the sauna industry in the U.S. The next step is the code breakdown which means the responses are broken down into smaller units of meaning, or "codes," which represent key ideas from the data. After coding, the next step was to identify themes for each code to help us analyze customer service in the American sauna market. After having identified the codes and themes under each code the author then reviewed and refined the themes. Then moving on to the last part which involves defining and naming the themes as each theme must have a clear name that reflects its core meaning. The final step involves writing a detailed analysis explaining each theme with supporting examples from the data. Thematic analysis is a highly popular technique among qualitative researchers for analyzing qualitative data (Naeem, 2023).

5 RESULTS FOR THE SAUNA HEATER COMPANY

In this chapter, the main results will be presented and explained under the qualitative research method used which was an email interview as well as the thematic analysis of the interview which will help to identify, analyze, and pinpoint themes within the data. After the interview findings, we will connect the interview insights with customer service theory. The email interview of the founder of the Case company: The Sauna Heater was conducted to generate a deeper understanding of customer service and saunas in America.

5.1 Thematic Analysis of The Email Interview

The email interview with the founder of the case company revealed several key themes regarding customer service and the sauna market in America. These themes provided insight into the challenges, expectations, and strategies used to enhance customer satisfaction in the sauna industry.

1. Importance of Customer Relationship Management (CRM) Systems

A major theme that emerged from the interview is the significance of having a proper CRM system to manage customer interactions efficiently. The interviewee emphasized the need for a streamlined system that combines multiple communication channels (email, phone, chat, etc.) and automates follow-ups. The use of Pipedrive CRM and Standard Operating Blueprints (SOBs) helps the company organize customer data and ensure consistent follow-ups.

2. Challenges in Educating Customers About Saunas

One of the biggest challenges customer representatives face is a lack of customer knowledge about saunas and their benefits. Since many American customers are unfamiliar with traditional sauna culture, representatives must educate buyers on how saunas work and help them choose the right product. Additionally, the expectation of fast shipping like Amazon creates not so patient customers, as sauna products require longer delivery times.

3. Managing Customer Expectations and Complaints

Setting clear expectations upfront was another major theme. Customers often expect fast shipping, easy installation, and immediate health benefits from using saunas. However, managing these expectations can be difficult, especially when customers receive damaged items or the wrong product. The interviewee stressed the importance of proactive communication reaching out to customers before they have to contact support to enhance the customer experience and make the customer happy.

4. Differences Between Finnish and American Sauna Perceptions

The interview highlighted a clear cultural difference between Finnish and American perspectives on sauna use. Americans view saunas as a health tool aimed at achieving specific wellness benefits, while Finns see sauna as a cultural tradition meant for relaxation. This difference influences customer expectations and the way saunas are marketed in the U.S.

5. Customer Service Technologies and Automation

Technology plays a crucial role in improving customer service. The company relies on CRM tools, automation, live chat, and virtual consultations (via Zoom) to enhance the customer experience. While AI was tested, it proved ineffective due to a lack of sauna-specific knowledge. Virtual consultations, however, have helped set clearer expectations and have improved customer interactions.

5.2 Connecting Interview Insights with Customer Service Theory

The findings from the email interview with the sauna heater company founder strongly align with established theories surrounding customer service processes, quality service delivery, multi-channel engagement, and customer experience. As customer service theory suggests, an effective service process is structured, consistent, and aligned with business goals reflected in the company's use of CRM tools like Pipedrive and Standard Operating Blueprints (SOBs) to centralize customer data and ensure standardized communication.

The need to educate customers about sauna usage highlights the importance of personalized and value-driven interactions, which is very important for delivering quality customer service. Managing customer expectations and addressing complaints further support the theoretical view that service recovery and clear communication are critical phases in the customer service lifecycle. The company's approach to using live chat, email, phone, and Zoom consultations illustrates the implementation of using multiple customer service channels to communicate with customers, allowing seamless customer engagement across multiple platforms, as advised in service channel theory.

Lastly, the cultural gap between Finnish and American sauna users reveals the importance of understanding customer experience in context validating the theory that emotional, cognitive, and cultural factors deeply shape customer expectations and satisfaction. Together, the interview findings and theoretical principles reinforce the significance of a well-structured, tech-enabled, and customer-centric service process in achieving superior customer experience in niche markets like saunas in the U.S.

6 CONCLUSION, RECOMMENDATIONS, AND FURTHER RESEARCH DIRECTIONS

The qualitative analysis of the email interview with the founder of the sauna heater company revealed five main themes that reflect the challenges and strategic approaches in delivering effective customer service in the American sauna market. First, the company emphasized the vital role of Customer Relationship Management (CRM) systems specifically Pipedrive and Standard Operating Blueprints (SOBs) in organizing customer interactions and ensuring consistent follow-up. Second, educating customers remains a major hurdle, as many Americans are unfamiliar with sauna culture, leading to the need for representatives to guide them in product understanding and selection. Third, the company highlighted the importance of proactively managing customer expectations and addressing complaints, especially concerning delivery times and product misunderstandings. Fourth, cultural differences between Finnish and American sauna users influence how products are marketed, and the expectations customers bring to the experience. Finally, the adoption of technology like live chat, virtual consultations, and automation has improved service quality and efficiency, although AI tools have shown limited effectiveness due to industry-specific knowledge gaps. These findings align closely with established theories on customer service processes, multi-channel engagement, and the significance of culturally contextualized customer experience.

6.1 Practical Recommendations

To improve customer service, companies should streamline service processes by implementing clear Standard Operating Procedures (SOPs) that ensure consistency across all touchpoints. Enhancing multi-channel support through the integration of platforms such as live chat, email, and Zoom can provide seamless and accessible customer interactions. Leveraging CRM tools like Pipedrive allows businesses to automate follow-ups and personalize service, improving customer relationships. It is also essential to set clear expectations by proactively communicating delivery and installation timelines, which helps reduce misunderstandings. Finally, regularly collecting customer feedback enables continuous refinement of processes and supports overall service quality improvement. These recommendations will improve customer service efficiency and customer satisfaction.

6.2 Further Research Directions

This study opens several avenues for future research. A comparative analysis of customer service strategies across various sauna companies could reveal broader industry trends and identify best practices. Additionally, a deeper exploration into how cultural perceptions particularly the difference between Finnish and American views on sauna use impact customer expectations and service approaches would provide valuable insights. Further research could also investigate innovative educational methods, such as webinars or interactive content, to enhance customer understanding and satisfaction. Lastly, future studies might focus on strategies aimed at building long-term customer loyalty, going beyond merely meeting expectations to building lasting relationships. These areas of research could improve customer service practices in niche industries and provide deeper insights into customer experience processes.

7 DISCUSSION AND RELIABILITY OF RESEARCH

The purpose of this thesis was to study effective customer service practices for small business growth. The study focused on theories surrounding customer service which includes the usage of multiple customer service channels, customer service processes, customer experience process and improving customer service experience as well as the target market. The objective of the study was to interview the founder of the Case Company: The Sauna Heater to get his thoughts on customer service and sauna in America and tie his thoughts together with the theory.

The thesis was conducted using two different methods of qualitative research: an email interview and thematic analysis. The main idea was to tie the results from the interview and thematic analysis together with customer service theory. Interviewing Veeti the sauna expert and owner of The Sauna Heater increased the reliability of the research by revealing all customer service practices the company uses and him being an expert in customer service. In the author's opinion, being employed in the case company having customer service experience and using two different methods also helped increase the reliability of the study. The previous working experience also offered advantages and saved time, since it was not necessary to start the research by learning the programs, products, and practices of the company.

As a result of the research, improving customer service can be done in a couple of ways. Having customer relationship management (CRM) systems and standard operating blueprints (SOB's) is important for helping the company organize data and ensure consistent follow-ups. A streamlined system that combines multiple communication channels (email, phone, and chat) for having different ways for the customer to reach out and connect. Finally, proactive communication reaching out to the customer before they have to contact support to enhance the overall customer experience and make the customer happy.

In general, the author was happy with the execution of the thesis. All the research questions were answered and several ideas for effective customer service practices for business growth were covered. The thesis was completed slower than expected. According to the timetable, the thesis should have been completed by December 2024 but was completed May 2025. The research was conducted in the fall of 2024 and the interview was done in February 2025. Artificial intelligence tools (ChatGPT) were used to support the thesis writing process in a limited and responsible way. These tools were assisted primarily with paraphrasing and improving the structure of the thesis. AI was also used to brainstorm ideas but did not contribute to the generation or interpretation of research data. All research design, data collection, analysis, and conclusions were conducted independently by the author.

Conducting qualitative research was both challenging and fulfilling. The analysis stage took longer than expected, highlighting the importance of dedicating adequate time to each phase of the study. Having well-defined research questions from the beginning helped keep the project focused and prevented it from becoming too broad. The theoretical framework was key in shaping the understanding of the findings and in guiding the development of relevant questions throughout the

research. Overall, the author found the topic to be interesting, timely, and complex. The thesis offered a valuable opportunity to connect academic theory with practical application. Despite the considerable effort involved, the author is satisfied with the final outcome.

REFERENCES

- Bitca, A. (2024) How to make an amazing first impression on every customer. <https://www.retenly.com/blog/first-impressions-customer-service/>
- Bowden, C., & Galindo-Gonzalez, S. (2015). Interviewing when you're not face-to-face: The use of email interviews in a phenomenological study. *International Journal of Doctoral Studies*, 10, 79-92. Retrieved <http://ijds.org/Volume10/IJDSv10p079-092Bowden0684.pdf>
- Colas. (2024, May 31). 4+1 Types of Market Segmentation & How You Can Use It (In 2024). *Waalaxy*. <https://blog.waalaxy.com/en/market-segmentation/>
- Deloitte Insights. *The consumer is changing, but perhaps not how you think*. (n.d.-b). Deloitte Insights. <https://www2.deloitte.com/us/en/insights/industry/retail-distribution/the-consumer-is-changing.html>
- Delve. (2024, April 15). *What are Semi-structured Interviews? — Delve*. Delve. <https://delvetool.com/blog/semi-structured>
- Grant, M. (2024, February 21). *What is customer service, and what makes it excellent?* Investopedia. <https://www.investopedia.com/terms/c/customer-service.asp>.
- Grönroos, C. 2000. *Service Management and Marketing. A Customer Relationship Management Approach*. Second Edition. West Sussex: John Wiley & Sons Ltd.
- Guanzon, A. (2024, June 6). *The Top 7 Customer Service Channels in 2023*. <https://www.dialpad.com/blog/customer-service-channels/>
- HarmannSport. (n.d.). *Commerical Sauna Market Trends and How To Maximize Business Potential*. <https://harmannsport.com/saunas-market-trends-business-opportunities/>
- Heeringa, B. (2018, November 15). *FINNISH SAUNAS IN AMERICA*. Almost Heaven Saunas. https://almostheaven.com/blogs/news/finnish-saunas-in-america?srltid=AfmBOooeBTK17S8rBlieiMRfMfEb9jCuYK7JDmo3aY_-1YazFQsthHQU
- Kiia. (2024, January 19). *Finnish sauna culture*. Taiga Times. <https://taigatimes.com/blog/finnish-sauna-culture/>
- Miels, E (2024) *Customer experience strategy: A step by step guide*. https://www.zendesk.com/blog/build-customer-experience-strategy/?utm_source=chatgpt.com
- Naeem, M., Ozuem, W., Howell, K., & Ranfagni, S. (2023). A Step-by-Step process of thematic analysis to develop a conceptual model in qualitative research. *International Journal of Qualitative Methods*, 22. <https://doi.org/10.1177/16094069231205789>
- Shultzenko, M (2025, April 8). 8 challenges in customer retention and how to overcome them. <https://www.custify.com/blog/customer-retention-challenges/>
- Sairanen, Veeti (2025, February 2). *The Sauna Heater*. <https://thesaunaheater.com>

- Sommer, M (2023). Sauna Culture in the USA. https://saunazeit.com/en/sauna-culture-in-the-usa/?utm_source=chatgpt.com
- Suresh, A (2024). Customer Service Process: How to Build and optimize it. <https://www.sprinklr.com/blog/customer-service-process/>
- Patton, M. Q. (2023). *Qualitative research & evaluation methods: Integrating Theory and Practice*. SAGE Publications.
- Team, I. (2024, August 7). *Target Market: Definition, Purpose, Examples, Market Segments*. Investopedia. <https://www.investopedia.com/terms/t/target-market.asp>
- Technavio. (n.d.). *Sauna Market Size, Share, Growth, Trends, Industry Analysis Forecast 2028*. Technavio, <https://www.technavio.com/>, All Right Reserved 2024. <https://www.technavio.com/report/us-sauna-market-analysis>
- The Sauna Heater. (2025, January 17). *Sauna Etiquette: Do's and Dont's of Sauna Going* [Video]. YouTube. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Vtel51ar_7g
- Zeithaml, V. A., Bitner, M. J., & Gremler, D. D. (2017). *Services Marketing: Integrating customer focus across the firm*. McGraw-Hill Education.

INTERVIEW GUIDE

APPENDIX 1

1. What strategies have you found most effective in providing excellent customer service in the U.S. sauna industry?
2. What challenges do customer service representatives face when assisting American customers with sauna-related purchases?
3. How do you handle customer complaints or dissatisfaction, and what improvements could be made?
4. What do you think are the key differences between the Finnish and American perceptions of sauna culture?
5. What customer expectations do you typically encounter regarding sauna products and services in the U.S.?
6. Are there any customer service technologies (live chat, AI, virtual consultations) that have improved the customer experience?