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**IMPROVING THE CUSTOMER SERVICE OF FOREIGN
CUSTOMERS IN A CASE COMPANY**

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CUSTOMERS IN A CASE COMPANY**

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ABSTRACT

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Today, the multiculturalism of any company's clientele is increasing and the role of different cultures in customer service situations is growing. The topic for this thesis emerged from the author's own experiences as a customer servant in the Case Company that was the commissioner of this thesis. The Company has plenty of foreign customers in the Oulu region and thus, improving the customer service of foreign customers is a current and an important issue.

The objective of the thesis was to examine how the customer service of foreign customers in the Case Company could be improved in practice. The study focused on the main channels of customer service in the Company: telephone services, electronic customer service and customer service at the service desk. The objective was also to introduce ideas for creating even more pleasant intercultural customer service situations for both the customer servants and the foreign customers of the Case Company in the future.

The study was conducted using three qualitative research methods: an email interview, document analyses and participant observations. The collected data was analyzed and interpreted in the context of theories about customer service, intercultural communication and intercultural competence. The results of the study suggested that the key to improving the customer service of foreign customers in the Case Company would be to offer regular training for the customer servants and to invest in developing the electronic customer service for foreign customers. Creating a comprehensive plan for consistently improving the customer service of foreign customers in the future could be more effective than single improvements.

Keywords: Customer service, intercultural customer service, customer service channels, intercultural communication

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1 INTRODUCTION

The world is developing to be more and more multicultural. The multiculturalism of any company's clientele is increasing and the role of different cultures in customer service situations is growing. Customer servants serve customers from different cultures every day. Today, customer service is important for any company and thus, it is recommended to invest in improving it.

The topic for this thesis emerged partly from the author's own experiences as a customer servant in the Case Company. Serving customers on the telephone and at the customer service desk of the Case Company offered an opportunity to find ways to improve the customer service of foreign customers in practice. The Case Company has plenty of foreign customers in the Oulu region and thus, improving the customer service of foreign customers is a current and an important issue.

The key terms of the thesis are customer service, intercultural customer service and intercultural competence. Due to globalization intercultural customer service situations have become common. Intercultural customer service is always affected by cultural backgrounds. Cultural background affects one's thinking, values, expectations and behavior. Cultural background defines what is being expected from customer service, a customer servant and how different situations are interpreted. Cultural competence, on the other hand, is a term used to describe the knowledge and the skills that help to act in cross-cultural situations. (Pesonen, Lehtonen & Toskala 2002, 12.)

This thesis consists of eight chapters. The theoretical context of the thesis discusses issues such as customer service, culture, intercultural competence and the communication between different cultures. The empirical part of the thesis introduces the study conducted, followed by the presentation of the results, conclusions and discussion.

Plenty of studies about intercultural customer service and intercultural competence have been conducted before. For example, Salonen (2001) studied the cross-cultural customer service from the perspective of hotel receptionists in her Master's thesis. Pitkänen (2012) studied cultural competence in customer service work from the perspective of waiters in her thesis. Similar studies have also been conducted from the perspective of health-care professionals. However, similar study has not previously been conducted for the Case Company.

The research problem of the study was to examine how the customer service of foreign customers in the Case Company could be improved. The purpose of this thesis was to discover ways to improve the customer service of foreign customers in the Case Company in practice and focused on three main channels of customer service in the Company: telephone services, electronic customer service and customer service at the service desk. The objective of the study was to introduce ideas of how the customer service situations could be more pleasant for both parties.

The study was conducted as a qualitative research which can be defined in several different ways. According to Patton and Cochran, (2002, date of retrieval 14.6.2014) qualitative research methods' objective is to increase understanding of the experiences and attitudes of the subjects. Qualitative methods attempt to answer questions about the "how", "why" or "what" of a certain phenomenon. There are several topics that can be addressed better with qualitative than quantitative research methods, for example people's experiences of a phenomenon, increasing understanding of different perspectives and understanding of how experiences, attitudes and life circumstances affect the behavior of people. Qualitative research can be executed using several kinds of methods. In this study, a semi-structured email interview, document analyses and participant observations were used as data collection methods.

Based on the results of the study, it seemed that the customer service of foreign customers on the telephone could be improved by continuing to concentrate the

English-speaking telephone calls to the customer servants who know English language and by arranging language training regularly for the customer servants of the Case Company. Allowing the English-speaking customers to leave a call back request could also improve their customer service. The electronic customer service of foreign customers could be improved by adding the language selection to the front page of the Case Company. Removing the current inconsistencies concerning the language from the Internet pages and translating for example the frequently asked questions into English would also improve the electronic customer service.

At the customer service desk of the Case Company, improvements could be achieved by defining the biggest cultural customer groups of the Company and considering their manners and habits in training. Also, going systematically through intercultural customer service situations with the customer servants could improve the level of intercultural customer service. In order to intercultural customer service situations to be pleasant for both the customers and the customer servants, the customer servants could be offered training to face foreign customers. Training could include for example knowledge of different cultures as wells as language skills. Perhaps choosing customer servants with good language skills and competent characteristics to serve foreign customers could be recommended.

The commissioner of this thesis is referred as the Case Company due to the request of the Company. Neither the field of business in which the Company operates is mentioned, since it could identify the company. However, the Case Company is a relatively large operator in its field of business in Finland. The author of this thesis was employed in the Company at the time the thesis was conducted. This affected the analyses and interpretation of the data and the results since it is not possible to entirely separate author's own experiences from the qualitative research process. Due to the author's employment in the Company, the products, practices and programs of the Company were already known and the author had a practical viewpoint to the customer service in the Case Company.

2 CUSTOMER SERVICE

A service can be defined as helping another person, being helpful or offering favors. Customer service, helping a customer, occurs in interaction with a customer which requires communication and emotion skills from a customer servant. Customer service can also be described as action in which a customer servant applies his knowledge and skills to build entities from the company's services that suit the needs of the customer. A customer and a customer servant meet in a customer service situation in which service is generated by the customer servant and simultaneously consumed by the customer, as can be seen in the figure 1. Because of this, every customer service situation is unique. (Ylikoski, Järvinen & Rosti 2002, 87.)

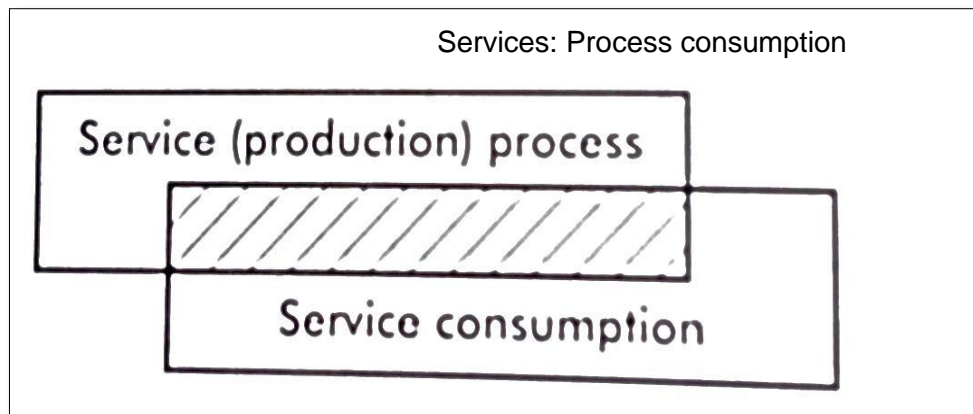


FIGURE 1. The process of services consumption (Grönroos 2000, 58)

2.1 Definition of customer service

The objective of customer service is to make a customer feel satisfied, experience quality and feel that he receives professional, reliable, fast service that is tailored for his personal needs. The most important skill in customer service is the understanding of the customer's point of view, empathy. How the customer feels and how he sees things is his truth in which he bases his decisions. (Pesonen et al. 2002, 59–60.)

Any organization needs “faces” and “personality” so that customers can approach it. A customer servant is the one in the organization whose face a customer sees and whose behavior affects the customer’s impression about the whole organization. Any person in the organization, who interacts with customers face to face, on the telephone, e-mail or online services, is in the role of a customer servant. Also, persons who produce information that modifies customers’ perception of the organization and its service quality are customer servants indirectly. (ibid., 64.)

Sometimes it is said that customer servants are links between customers and companies. Customer servants receive plenty of information about the customers, they understand and interpret customers’ needs and serve customers. Every customer service situation offers information about customers’ needs, factors that might cause dissatisfaction and problems that occur when customers use services of the company. Customers may also present ideas for improvement of service. In general, customer service is an important information resource for companies. (Ylikoski et al. 2002, 59.)

A customer servant has several roles in an interaction situation with a customer. The customer servant produces the service and affects its quality, monitors the quality of the service he has produced and reacts to the needs and expectations of the customers and based on those, modifies the service. The customer servant also creates and maintains customer relations and offers possible additional services. However, the customer also affects to the success of a service situation. Communication in customer service situations should be successful from the perspective of the customer, but also from the point of view of the company. The aim of a customer servant is to produce service, when the customer’s objective is to receive the service, use it or receive information. The nature and content of the service determine the nature of interaction between the customer and the customer servant and the duration of the customer service situation. Usually the information related to the service situation dominates the interaction between the customer servant and the customer. (ibid., 59–60.)

2.2 Different channels of customer service

An efficient and professional customer service situation proceeds as a process, whether the customer is served in person or on the telephone. The objectives of the service and actions differ in different stages of the process. The order of the stages of the process is the same when meeting with a customer personally and when a customer is served on the telephone. The process begins even before any words are spoken, as nonverbal communication. This nonverbal communication could be for instance noticing the customer, the atmosphere in the customer service premises or the time the customer waits before his telephone call is answered. (Ylikoski et al. 2002, 97.)

Figure 2 demonstrates how a customer service situation can be divided into five different stages: opening, takeover, processing, summary and finishing. All these stages are important for the success of the whole service situation. At the opening stage it is important to create positive atmosphere. A customer servant can try to create positive atmosphere for example by showing friendliness and willingness to serve the customer. At the takeover stage the customer servant is expected to feel the situation and ask the customer's needs. The processing stage includes actual processing of the issue. The customer servant could ask definite questions, propose a solution and justify it and also answer all the possible counterarguments that the customer might have. After the customer is satisfied with the solution, the customer servant summarizes what has been agreed on. Service is concluded with the finishing stage, at which the customer servant thanks the customer either for his contact, efforts or buying decision. A friendly ending salutation that suits the customer and the situation is also a part of good service. (ibid.)

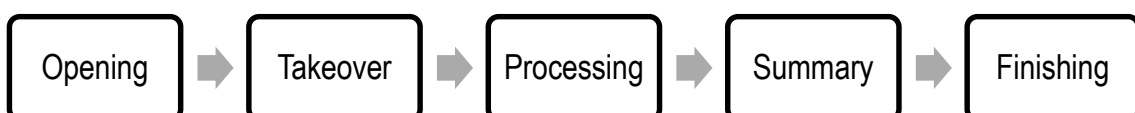


FIGURE 2. Customer service process (adapted from Ylikoski et al. 2002, 97)

Every meeting with a customer can be seen as a possibility for a company to affect the customer's opinion of the company. The most effectively this can be done when meeting the customer in person. When a customer and a customer servant meet in person, the customer servant is able to use all possible ways of communication and the role of nonverbal communication is emphasized. Words that are spoken, heard or read represent a small portion of all communication that occurs between people. Nonverbal communication includes everything that is not said: body language, facial expressions and the way people act and react. For a customer servant it is important to know how to interpret the nonverbal messages of the customers since they do not always express their frustration or confusion with words. (Performance Research Associates 2006, 65–67.)

When meeting in person, it is easier for the customer servant to express his appreciation and willingness to serve the customer more versatile than when, for example, serving the customer via e-mail. Meeting the customer in person requires that the customer servant knows and manages the services, products and information systems of the company and has both communication and emotion skills. In case the customer servant has recently begun in the company and does not yet have all the required skills and knowledge, it is responsible to inform customers about this with, for example, a trainee-badge. (Ylikoski et al. 2002, 98.)

The Internet has become an important tool for customer service. It serves customers as a fast channel of finding information, regardless of time or location. Internet pages can be considered as one of companies' customer service channels. For many companies, the Internet has become the most important tool for customer relationship management. Electronic communication is also an important part of the reputation and the image of customer service of a company. A company's Internet pages affect the image that a customer has of the company. Unclear or inconsistent Internet pages are likely to give a negative image of the company to the customer. The same applies for pages that contain outdated or irrelevant information. (Pesonen et al. 2002, 127–128.)

Nowadays companies often consider improving the Internet based customer service important. There are usually two objectives: on the one hand, companies want to improve the availability of information, and on the other hand, they would like to change the behavior of consumers. Instead of visiting the customer service desk or using the telephone services, companies try to persuade their customers to use their Internet services because administration of Internet pages saves the expenses of customer service. Online services can easily mostly satisfy the customers' need of information according to the "20/80 rule". It is said that 20 percent of the information available can solve 80 percent of the customers' problems. Thus, it is advisable to create a section for frequently asked questions to the company's Internet page where most customers can find a solution to their problems fast and conveniently. (ibid., 129.)

When a customer is served on the telephone, the customer servant and the customer cannot see each other, which is the main difference compared to serving a customer in person. The customer servant is only able to use his speech and sense of hearing. Instead, the significance of body language is far less than when meeting in person, since it is only transmitted through the voice. On the telephone, the messages are transmitted as words and voices. The customer creates conceptions based on the words he has heard and feelings transmitted by the voice of the customer servant. The style with which telephone calls are answered creates conceptions for the customer also about the company, not only about the customer servant. (Performance Research Associates 2006, 68.)

A customer creates images of a customer servant based on different kinds of tones of voice and manners of speech. Most people imagine a person with a quiet voice as uncertain but a loud voice might be experienced as being aggressive. A high voice might make customers nervous. Low voice is usually felt calming and pleasant by most people. A fast manner of speech might create a rushed, even nervous image of the customer servant when a slow manner of speech is often experienced as calm and considerate. It can be said that customers usually prefer fairly low voice and rather slow manner of speech on

the telephone. Actually, slow manner of speech is necessary on the telephone because the customer is only able to use his sense of hearing and cannot receive a large amount of details simultaneously. Thus, it is important for the customer servant to divide the amount of information given to the customer and make pauses in his speech. (Ylikoski et al. 2002, 103–104.)

Telephone services do not allow the customer servant to notice the customer who is waiting for his turn to be served. Instead, companies could use developed telephone technology which offers plenty of possibilities to take care of the customers queuing. For instance, customers could hear music or customers could be asked to type and choose the service they need. Also, some telephone systems allow customers to leave a call-back request. Most telephone technologies ensure that the customers will be served according to their queuing order and some systems give an estimate of the time left until the customer will be served. The concept of queuing time is more critical with telephone services since the queuing time feels far longer on the telephone than when customers are served in person. (ibid, 104.)

2.3 Quality of customer service

The quality of customer service is crucial to the success of any company. In general, services can be described as intangible occasions in which both the production and the consumption of a service occur simultaneously. Thus, the service provider and the consumer interact and the way this interaction occurs during the service situation affects the consumer's impression of the level of the service quality. Usually customers consider important the interaction with the service provider. Often the customer's perception of the service quality is based on his impressions of the quality of the interaction. (Pesonen et al. 2002, 44; Wursten, Fadrhonc & Roersoe 2009, date of retrieval 14.6.2014.)

Quality of customer service can be described as how well the service corresponds to the customer's expectations or requirements. A service company's quality is the customer's opinion about the succeeding of the

service. A customer's perception of quality is formed during the first service situation and can become more precise after few customer service situations. Actually, a customer can be said to be "an interpreter of the quality" and the quality of the customer service should be considered from the perspective of a customer. (Ylikoski et al. 2002, 51.)

According to Grönroos, the service quality perceived by a customer has two different dimensions; a technical (or outcome) dimension and a functional (or process-related) dimension. The technical quality can be associated with *what* a customer receives when interacting with a company. This dimension of quality describes the outcome of a service production process and what the customer has left with after the customer service interaction. However, a customer usually interacts with a company many times and thus, the technical quality dimension will not constitute the total quality perceived by the customer. The customer's perception of service quality is also influenced by *how* he receives the service and how he has experienced the process in which the service is simultaneously produced and consumed. This represents the functional dimension of the customer perceived quality. (2000, 63–64.)

2.4 Intercultural customer service

Most customer service situations can be seen as intercultural. Different groups of people, even within the same nationality, have different values, interest, norms and views of life. All these factors have an effect on the expectations that people have towards customer service. (Pesonen et al. 2002, 126.)

People evaluate the behavior of another person based on their own culture. A person's own culture is a scale based on which he evaluates if the behavior of another person is normal, abnormal, acceptable, friendly or hostile. When the parties of a customer service situation represent different cultures and nationalities, there is a possibility to misinterpret the motives and aims of the other party. In general, understanding and considering cultural differences is important in the service sector. A customer servant needs to be able to

understand that a person from another culture sees the reality from a different perspective. He should also understand why people from a different culture see the reality differently, how they express their perceptions and how their perceptions differ from those of the customer servant. In order for the customer servant to understand the customer successfully, it is important for the customer servant to listen to and acknowledge the customer. In other words, the customer servant should be able to “read” the customer and the signs of his expectations. In this process intercultural awareness plays an important role. (Pesonen et al. 2002, 127; Wursten et al. 2009, date of retrieval 14.6.2014.)

In a customer service situation, in which the customer is a foreigner, there are three main factors that are likely to effect on the customer service situation: foreign language, cultural differences and the preconceptions both parties might have towards the foreign culture. In general, customers do not appreciate poor language skills and thus, recruiting customer servants who master foreign languages and are able to communicate with foreign customers, is advisable. Cultural differences, for instance the way of addressing people and attitudes towards genders or older people, might cause confusion. The perception of the outcome and truthfulness of the customer service situation is also depending on culture. For example, Finns consider keeping promises extremely important, even if they were given orally. In many cultures only a written promise is an agreement. On the other hand, different cultures consider even a written agreement differently. In some cultures a written, signed agreement is legally binding whereas in other cultures it is seen just as a phase in an ongoing interaction. The less the parties of intercultural customer service situation know about the cultural background of another party, the likely cultural differences are to cause confusion. (Pesonen et al. 2002, 126–127; Wursten et al. 2009, date of retrieval 14.6.2014.)

The conception of excellent customer service differs among different cultures. For a service company it is important to acknowledge that in order to provide excellent customer service for culturally diverse customer segments, customer service should be managed in a culturally appropriate way. Culture influences on the quality expectations of customers and thus, on customer service.

Qualified intercultural customer service requires considering several different aspects. Intercultural customer service can be said to be qualified when the needs and expectations of the multicultural clientele are satisfied consistently. The service provider must be aware of and know the behavioral norms, preferences, attitudes and values of multicultural customers. Customer servants also need to recognize that there are differences for example in politeness, formality, friendliness, punctuality and the level of personal consideration when they are serving customers from different cultures. Thus, to be able to offer qualified customer service for multicultural customer groups, customer servants should be aware of the cultural differences and consistently find ways to fulfill the needs of multicultural customers. (Wursten et al. 2009, date of retrieval 14.6.2014; Edupoli 2011, date of retrieval 5.6.2014.)

3 COMMUNICATION BETWEEN CULTURES

Hofstede (2003, 260) defined culture as “*the collective programming of the mind which distinguishes the members of one group or category of people from another*”. On the other hand, Trompenaars and Hampden-Turner (1997, 6) determined culture as “*the way in which a group of people solves problems and reconciles dilemmas*”. Thus, culture can be defined in several different ways and an exact definition for culture does not exist. However, in this thesis culture is discussed by the ideologies of both Hofstede and Trompenaars and Hampden-Turner.

3.1 The definition of culture

According to Hofstede, culture is not inherited, it is learned. It originates from the social environment one lives in, not from genes. Culture includes one’s patterns of feeling, thinking and potential acting that are learned throughout a person’s lifetime. A person is most exposed to assimilating and learning in his early childhood, which is why much of those patterns are acquired at that time. Culture is also said to be a collective phenomenon, since it is always at least partially shared with the people who live in that same social environment, where the culture was learned. (2003, 4–5.)

Usually persons belong to several different groups of people at the same time and carry a number of different levels of culture within themselves. Different levels of culture can be separated by, for example, national, regional, corporate, professional, generation or social class. A national level of culture corresponds to one’s home country, for instance the French or the Singaporean. Since most countries include culturally different regions, ethnic and language groups, also regional, ethnic, religious and linguistic levels of culture can be defined. Corporate culture describes how attitudes are expressed in a certain organization. It is possible to recognize even cultures of particular functions of an organization, for example the culture of marketing, research and

development or human resources functions. People working in particular functions usually share some professional orientations. However, culture also includes a gender level, according to which gender a person represents. Grandparents are separated from parents by a generation level of culture and a social class level of culture is affected by one's education and occupation. The values in these several levels of culture are often contradictory in modern societies. For example, generation values may not encounter with religious values. (Trompenaars & Hampden-Turner 1997, 7; Hofstede 2003, 10.)

Trompenaars and Hampden-Turner use an onion metaphor to describe culture (figure 3). They suggest that culture is built in layers, such as an onion. To be able to understand culture, one needs to "unpeel" it layer by another. A person's first observations of a new culture concern usually the outer layer of the "onion", which comprises of explicit culture. Explicit culture can be understood as the observable "products", or artifacts, of a culture, for instance the language, buildings, monuments, food and fashion. The artifacts represent deeper norms and values of a society that cannot be seen directly. The middle layer of the cultural "onion" comprises of the norms and values of a group of people. Norms can be understood as the mutual perception of the group of what is "right" or what is "wrong". Norms can be formal, for example written laws, and informal, for instance in the form of social control. On the other hand, values specify the definitions for "good" and "bad". Thus, values are related to the ideals that a group shares. The core of the "onion" consists of basic assumptions. Problems that are regularly solved fade from consciousness and develop into basic assumptions. Basic assumptions are implicit and determine the meanings that a group shares. For example, survival is the most basic value for people. Each civilization has organized themselves to discover ways to most effectively cope with the environment, with the resources available for them. Such permanent dilemmas are eventually resolved automatically; in such obvious manners that, eventually, the solutions vanish from the consciousness. (1997, 6-7; 21-23.)

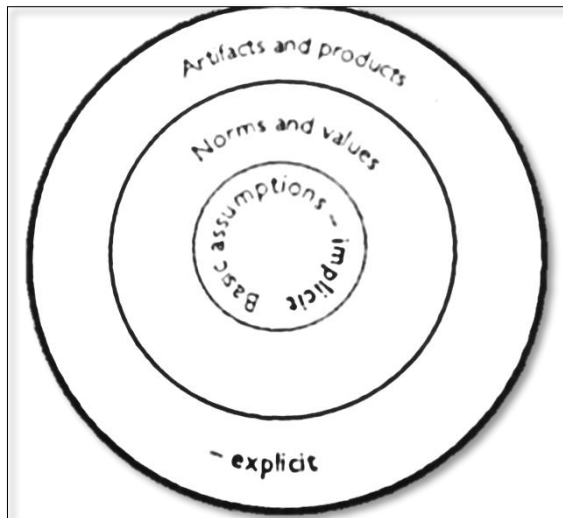


FIGURE 3. A model of culture (Trompenaars & Hampden-Turner 1997, 22)

People from other cultures cannot be aware of the values of a certain culture simply by looking at people who represent the alien culture for them. Some conclusions can be drawn, for example, from the way people dress, but nowadays most business people dress similarly regardless of their cultural origin. Only when people say or do something, the others are able to gain deeper perception of the other culture. These utterances or acts can be described as “cultural displays” or events, because they uncover different kinds of cultural attitudes. (Lewis 2000, 27–29.)

3.2 Intercultural communication

The succeeding of interaction between people depends on how well they understand each other’s messages. The way people notice and interpret messages is mostly learnt and depends on culture. Differences in communication can be caused by typical behavior for a certain culture, the influence of a subculture or the behavior of an individual. Respecting and appreciating another person is the most important issue in intercultural communication. (City of Turku 2007, date of retrieval 8.6.2014.)

Intercultural communication can be defined as communication that occurs between persons or groups of people from different cultural or linguistic origins.

The following fundamental definitions form a basis for this definition: communication is said to be an active relationship between people established through language, and intercultural means that the communicative relationship exists between people from different cultural origins, where culture means the structured expression of human behavior in social context within certain national and local nuances, for example linguistic, institutional, political and economic. Intercultural communication can be identified as a concept, but also as a competence. By intercultural competence is usually meant an individual's active possession of qualities which support effective intercultural communication and can be determined by three primary characteristics: skills, attitudes and knowledge. (University of Southampton 2010, date of retrieval 8.6.2014.)

Besides respecting and appreciating another person, sincere desire for communication can be seen as important in intercultural communication. For an individual, it is also important to recognize the cultural attitudes and preconceptions one has, since they partly effect to the way he notices and interprets different messages. One should be aware of the factors that affect communication and differences in ways of communication, since usually those cause misunderstandings and contradictions in intercultural communication situations. In some cultures there are strict rules for creating and maintaining relationships. Interaction and communication can be formal and include several rules and behavioral patterns. Same rules do not apply to all relationships, but they vary according to the gender, age and status of both parties. In some cultures interaction between people is more uncontrolled and open than in others. Differences in communication between cultures can be seen for example in the meaning of different words, topics and nonverbal communication. (City of Turku 2007, date of retrieval 8.6.2014.)

4 INTERCULTURAL COMPETENCE

Globalization is developing the world and single countries to be even more multicultural. Nowadays multiculturalism affects any company and their clientele and the role of different cultures in customer service situations is continuously growing. Thus, investing in intercultural competence can be said to be a long-term investment. Unfortunately, incompetence in intercultural communication is not often noticed until misunderstandings have led to a conflict situation. (Huovila 2006, date of retrieval 5.6.2014.)

Intercultural competence can be defined as a mix of cognitive, affective and behavioral characteristics and skills that support interaction in different cultural contexts. Cognitive characteristics can be for example cultural self-awareness and general and specific knowledge of cultures. Affective characteristics can include curiosity towards and motivation to know other cultures as well as open-mindedness. Behavioral skills, then, can comprise of one's skills to build relationships, gather information and feel empathy. It can be important to notice that cultural knowledge does not always generate competence and learning a foreign language might not be necessary for learning a foreign culture. (Bennett 2011, date of retrieval 7.7.2014.)

Huovila (2006, date of retrieval 5.6.2014) refers to Salo-Lee (2005) when defining an interculturally competent person. Intercultural competence includes an idea of multiculturalism; an individual is able to change his behavioral norms according to the behavior required by the multicultural situation. This means that the individual is able to adapt to different situations best possible way, no matter which cultures are present in a communication situation. Intercultural competence is said to include three main issues: the ability to communicate with people from different cultures in a way that earns their respect and trust, the ability to adapt one's professional skills to the local conditions and limitations and the ability to personally adapt so that one is satisfied and feels being and

working in another culture natural. A concept closely related to intercultural competence is cultural intelligence.

The term cultural intelligence refers to an individual's, or an 'outsider's, natural ability to interpret and even mirror unfamiliar gestures, speech patterns and other human actions of a person who belongs to another culture than the individual himself. Cultural intelligence is said to include three different components: the cognitive, the emotional/motivational and the physical. The cognitive component refers to the learning strategies of a person. Simply learning about the customs and beliefs of other culture might even prove to be unavailing since the natives of the culture may be reserved to explain their customs to strangers. Instead, a person with high cultural intelligence is able to use learning strategies to discover clues to a culture's shared understandings. The emotional/motivational component of cultural intelligence addresses overcoming obstacles involved in adapting to a new culture. An individual who believes that he is not able to understand people from different cultures will usually give up if his efforts meet with hostility. On the other hand, an individual with high motivation to understand people from a foreign culture will try again with even greater vigor after confronting obstacles. The physical component, then, refers to the actions of an individual. One cannot convince people from foreign culture by showing that he understands their culture; his actions should prove that he already has learnt some of their habits. Adopting people's habits allows one to understand the foreign culture in the most elemental way. (Earley & Mosakowski 2004, date of retrieval 11.6.2014.)

Intercultural competence can also be developed and trained. In order to do so, a person should have at least a basic willingness to improve and question himself. Intercultural training can be described by three main dimensions: cognitive content, emotions and affects. Intercultural competence can be said to be about what a person knows and feels. The three basic steps of intercultural training and the issues that are needed to be considered are awareness, knowledge and skills. A person wishing to train his intercultural competence should question his perceptions of culture in general and examine how he reacts to differences in cultures in his everyday life (awareness). It could be also

useful to examine foreign cultures and compare those to one's own culture as well as consider what kind of emotions this examination evokes (knowledge). One could especially consider whether he feels nervous, fascinated, amused and enthusiastic or something else due to exploring foreign cultures. It could also prove useful to consider one's theoretical knowledge about foreign cultures and whether it could help to understand why people from other cultures behave like they do (skills). One's theoretical knowledge of a foreign culture could help him to develop his intercultural competence but the theoretical knowledge alone is not enough to become an interculturally competent person. (Sapiro & Rostev 2014, date of retrieval 7.7.2014.)

5 RESEARCH PROCESS

The objective of this thesis was to discover ways to improve the customer service of foreign customers in a Case Company and to provide practical ideas for the improvement of the customer service. Since the author of the thesis was employed in the Case Company at the time the thesis was conducted and considering the nature of the thesis, choosing qualitative research methods, such as observations and document analyses, was seen natural. In this chapter the concept of qualitative research is firstly explained, followed by the introduction of the research methods used. This chapter also explains the particular research process thoroughly.

5.1 Qualitative research

Qualitative research can be said to be characterized by its aims, which are often related to understanding some features of social life, and its methods which usually generate words as data for deeper analysis. In contrast, quantitative research methods aim to measure something, for example the percentage of people using public transportation in a certain city. The major differences between qualitative and quantitative research methods occur in their objectives, the types of questions used, the types of data produced and the data collection instruments used. However, there are different sorts of research questions, some of them requiring quantitative and some qualitative research methods to be answered. In general, it could be better to start with qualitative research methods in situations where little is known since quantitative methods might allow one to generate hypothesis that can be tested by quantitative methods afterwards. (Patton & Cochran 2002, date of retrieval 14.6.2014; TechSociety Research 2006, date of retrieval 29.6.2014.)

According to Patton and Cochran, qualitative research methods' objective is to increase understanding of the experiences and attitudes of the subjects. Qualitative methods attempt to answer questions about the "how", "why" or

“what” of a certain phenomenon. There are several topics that can be addressed better with qualitative than quantitative research methods, for example people’s experiences of a phenomenon, increasing understanding of different perspectives and understanding of how experiences, attitudes and life circumstances affect the behavior of people. (2002, date of retrieval 14.6.2014.)

5.2 Research methods

In this thesis, three common and fundamental methods of qualitative data collection were used. Firstly, a semi-structured email interview was used to offer some basic knowledge about the customer service of foreign customers in the Case Company. Secondly, by analyzing documents through content analyses information about electronic customer service and customer service on the telephone was collected and thirdly, participant observations were conducted to receive knowledge about customer service situations with foreign customers at the customer service desk.

In general, interviews can be divided into unstructured or structured types of interviews. Unstructured interviews are closer to observations, whereas structured interviews are closer to questionnaires due to the use of closed questions. However, semi-structured interviews can be placed somewhere between unstructured and structured interviews. Semi-structured interviews can be recommended in situations, where the interviewer has only one chance to interview the interviewee. An interview guide, which often is paper-based and includes a list of questions and topics that should be covered, provides instructions for the interviewer and thus, semi-structured interviews can provide reliable qualitative data. (Robert Wood Johnson Foundation 2008, date of retrieval 25.6.2014; Newton 2010, date of retrieval 25.6.2014.)

Face-to-face interviews are often considered as the traditional technique of interviewing. However, computer mediated communication forms (for instance emails) have become common and nowadays interviews can also be conducted via email. One of the major advantages of email interviews is the extended

access to participants and the independence of time and place. Email interviewing allows the interviewee 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 are also disadvantages of email interviewing. Email interviews lack completely social cues, for example nonverbal communication, that are present in face-to-face interviews. The technique can be quite time-consuming since the interviewee might wait some time before answering the questions. Thus, there is a risk that the interviewee could lose interest in the research. Comparing the advantages and disadvantages of email interviewing to face-to-face interviewing could be recommended when evaluating the possibility to conduct an email interview. (Opdenakker 2006, date of retrieval 3.7.2014.)

Document analysis can be defined as a systematic technique for evaluating or reviewing both printed and electronic documents. In order to evoke meanings, gain further understanding and develop empirical knowledge through document analysis, the available data should be examined and interpreted carefully. In general, documents contain words (text) and possibly images that have been recorded without an intervention of the researcher. Documents that can be systematically analyzed as a part of a study may be in a variety of forms. For example, documents that can be evaluated are manuals, advertisements, application forms, brochures, press releases, attendance registers, survey data and various other documents. The analytic process in document analysis requires finding, choosing, appraising and synthesizing data that is contained in documents. Document analysis generates data, for instance quotations, excerpts or passages that should be organized into major categories, themes and case examples through content analysis. (Bowen 2009, date of retrieval 16.6.2014.)

Content analysis is a research method which allows a researcher to create repeatable and valid conclusions of the research material's relation to its factual connection. Through content analysis new information and views can be created. The main focus in content analysis is on verbal, symbolic and communicative contents. The material in content analyses could be almost

anything as long as it is related to the phenomenon researched and it can be combined, observed and analyzed. In content analysis, the material is examined by categorizing, summarizing and searching similarities and differences. The objective of content analysis is to describe the phenomenon verbally and clearly, to form a summarized description of the phenomenon that is being observed and connect the results to a wider context. At the same time, the aim is to increase the informative value of the material by creating meaningful information of the material. In a qualitative content analysis of a research material, the material is first divided into smaller units, then conceptualized and finally, reorganized into a new entirety. (Anttila 1998, date of retrieval 15.8.2014; Saaranen-Kauppinen & Puusniekka 2006a; date of retrieval 15.8.2014.)

Observations are common and traditional methods for collecting qualitative data and can be executed in several different ways. In this research, participant observation was used as a research method. Participant observation is said to be one of the most common ways to collect qualitative data but also one of the most demanding ones. The method requires that the researcher participates in the context or culture that is being observed and becomes accepted as a natural part of the culture. The aim is to ensure that the observations are of the natural phenomenon. (Trochim 2006, date of retrieval 14.6.2014.)

Data collected through participant observation can be said to be only as good as the observations, descriptions and notes of the researcher. The researcher should be well prepared and thoroughly understand what the research is about to determine clear objectives for data collection. The population that will be observed, the sites, times of day and dates for observations should be determined beforehand. Making notes should also be considered before the actual observation activity. A list of things to pay attention to could prove useful. During the observation activity the researcher should remember to observe actively for scenarios he had not expected since those could develop the research to a new direction. After each participant observation activity the researcher should expand his notes into descriptions of what he has observed. (TechSociety Research 2009, date of retrieval 29.6.2014.)

5.3 Description of the research process

The objective of this thesis was to study how the customer service of foreign customers in the Case Company could be improved. The study focused on three main channels of customer service in the Company: telephone services, electronic customer service and customer service at the service desk. The purpose was not to make universal generalizations of serving foreign customers. Instead, the objective was to observe the customer service of foreign customers in the Case Company and based on the observations and interpretations, give suggestions for improving the customer service of foreign customers in the Company.

This study was conducted by using three different methods of qualitative research; an email interview, document analysis and participant observations. These three methods were chosen to support each other and to increase the understanding of the customer service of foreign customers in the Case Company and the different customer service channels considered in this thesis. In social sciences, the phenomenon is often referred as the technique called triangulation. By triangulation is usually meant combining and applying different methods, researchers or theories in a study. The main idea of triangulation is to check the results by combining different methods and thus, increase the reliability of the research. In this research, the technique of method triangulation was used. Method triangulation refers to using several different methods for collecting data, for example interviews and observations. Triangulation can be said to serve as an alternative to other criteria, such as reliability and validity, for qualitative analyses. (Saaranen-Kauppinen & Puusniekka 2006b, date of retrieval 19.7.2014.)

The interview of the Customer Service Manager of the Company was initially planned as a semi-structured interview and an interview guide, which included 15 questions, was prepared beforehand (appendix 1). However, the interviewee suggested that she could answer the questions via email after examining statistics and considering her answers thoroughly. The Service Manager of the

Company could also see the questions and add her opinions. Thus, it was decided that they would answer the questions via email. The Customer Service Manager received the interview questions on Wednesday, 2.7.2014 and the Service Manager received the questions and the answers of the Customer Service Manager on Monday, 14.7.2014. The author received their final answers on 15.7.2014. The Managers received and answered the questions in Finnish. For the thesis, the author translated both the questions and the answers into English. The purpose of the interview was to provide the author with general knowledge of the customer service of foreign customers in the Company and the Managers' perceptions of intercultural customer service.

Content analyses were chosen as a research method to examine electronic customer service of foreign customers in the Case Company but also to generate deeper understanding of the customer service of foreign customers on the telephone. Analyses of telephone calls were conducted in June and July. The material analyzed included 22 phone calls from foreign customers. The phone calls for analyses were received from the Customer Service Manager of the Company. She retrieved phone calls from the Company's telephone system and delivered the tapes for the author via email. The Customer Service Manager listened and chose the first eight phone calls before delivering them to the author. The rest 14 phone calls were retrieved and chosen from the system randomly. The phone calls were analyzed according to certain criteria that were defined beforehand. The purpose was to examine what kind of issues foreign customers take care of on the telephone, what kind of issues might cause challenges to customer service of foreign customers and how was the communication between the customer servants and the customers on the telephone. Suggestions for improving the customer service of foreign customers on the telephone were given based on the analyses.

The Internet pages of the Case Company were analyzed during August 2014 using content analysis. The analysis focused on the material that was available on the Internet pages in English at the time of the analysis. The purpose was to examine how the Case Company had already considered their foreign customers on their Internet pages and how the electronic customer service of

foreign customers could be improved, based on the theoretical context of the thesis. Before observing the Internet pages, certain criteria for the analyses were decided. The aim of the research was not to analyze implicates but examine actual contents. Thus, the interpretation of the material was not highly dependent on the researcher.

The analysis began by observing the Internet pages of the Company in general in order to identify, what kind of information was available. Then, the concentration was on the material that could be found in English, for example the information and services that were available in English on the pages. Here the focus was on the observed issues that were defined beforehand and had arisen from the theoretical context. Thus, besides the information and services that could be found in English, clarity, consistency and practicality of the English-language Internet pages of the Company were considered. The author tried and tested the services that were available in English herself to see how they were organized. After analyzing the results, suggestions for improving the electronic customer service of foreign customers were given.

The purpose of the participant observations was to collect data about the customer service of foreign customers at the customer service desk of the Company. Participant observation was chosen as a data collection method since it was anticipated that it could provide the author with concrete, real life examples of the customer service situations with foreign customers. At the service desk of the company there were places for two customer servants and the author was also placed at the service desk as a customer servant. Participant observations were conducted on five dates: 2.7., 4.7., 11.7., 21.7. and 22.7.2014 during the author's shifts at the service desk between 8.00 a.m. and 4 p.m. The original purpose was to observe the customer service situations between customer servants and foreign customers when they entered the customer service premises and act mostly as an observer. In practice, it proved difficult to act as an observer since foreign customers mostly came to the author's desk during the shifts. Thus, the point of view was changed from mostly observing to mostly participating.

Notes were prepared during the observations with pen and paper and afterwards written “open”. The issues that were considered most important to pay attention to were what kind of issues foreign customers were taking care of at the service desk, how was the communication between the customers and the customer servant and what kind of issues could possibly cause challenges to the intercultural customer service situations.

6 RESULTS

In this chapter the main results will be presented and explained under the three methods of qualitative research used: an email interview, document analyses and participant observations. The results were chosen to be presented by the research methods since it was considered as the clearest way of presenting the results. In addition, dividing the results by the research methods would also divide the results by the customer service channels considered in this thesis. Document analyses were used to examine both electronic customer service and the customer service of foreign customers on the telephone, whereas participant observations were conducted to collect data about the intercultural customer service situations at the Company's service desk. The email interview of the Service Managers of the Company was conducted to generate deeper understanding of the customer service of foreign customers in the Case Company in general. The relation of the results and the theoretical context will be analyzed in the next chapter.

6.1 Email interview

For the interview, the Customer Service Manager and the Service Manager of the Case Company answered the questions presented in the appendix 1. The number of foreign customers served through each three customer service channels of the Company varies depending on different seasons. During autumns and springs the amount of contacts from foreign customers is usually greater since there are plenty of foreign students in Oulu. The Managers could not estimate the share of foreign customers from the Company's entire clientele. However, they estimated that the number of foreign customers served on the telephone would be from five to ten customers weekly, as well as the amount of foreign customers who visit the customer service desk. They also estimated that the Company receives from three to six contacts from foreign customers weekly through the electronic customer service. Foreign customers seemed to take care of the same issues on the telephone, through electronic

customer service and at the service desk. The interviewees believed that foreign customers would prefer to visit the customer service desk because taking care of things could feel easier and more natural face-to-face with the customer servants. They had noticed that foreign customers often came to the service desk together with an interpreter or a friend, if their own language skills were not well advanced.

According to the interviewees, there were some differences in serving foreign and Finnish customers. Sometimes different language could cause problems and it could be that in such a situation, the customer would not be necessarily offered for example different contract alternatives. However, the objective of the Company was that foreign customers would be served as well and with as good quality as Finnish customers. The interviewees could also name a few differences in the expectations of foreign and Finnish customers towards customer service. They thought that foreign customers usually take things a bit more relaxed way and nearly never lose their temper. They seemed not to complain “for nothing” and settle for how they were told things were, for example in a situation where they faced the consequences of unpaid invoices.

In the interviewees’ opinion, foreign customers were currently served well in the Company. For example, serving foreign customers on the telephone had been concentrated to those customer servants who know English language. This was possible through the Company’s telephone system, in a way that those calls in which a customer had chosen to receive service in English, were directed to the certain persons. The customer servants of the Company were also regularly offered language training in which they went through professional vocabulary and customer service situations.

The interviewees mentioned some actions that had already been taken to improve the customer service of foreign customers in the Company. The Internet pages of the Company were being improved to serve the foreign customers of the Company even better. Currently, offer and contract forms as well as the form for cancelling the contract had been translated into English. Offering language training to the customer servants was also seen as a part of

considering foreign customers. The interviewees found English lessons very useful and mentioned that the customer servants of the Company had liked the lessons and expressed willingness to participate to the lessons regularly in the future as well. According to the interviewees, English lessons helped the customer servants to maintain their language skills and encouraged them to use the language. As actions to improve the customer service of foreign customers, the interviewees suggested translating the invoices, contract confirmations and other forms into English as well.

According to the interviewees, excellent intercultural customer service included knowing foreign cultures so that communication could be as natural as possible. Positive and friendly attitude towards foreign customers formed a basis for excellent customer service. They named empathy, flexibility, enthusiasm, friendliness and patience as skills that were needed in intercultural communication and added, that sometimes customer servants may have to resort to gestures and body language if a common language with a customer does not exist.

The Managers could name several skills that, in their opinion, the customer servants need in intercultural customer service situations. They considered flexibility, communication and considering others as the most essential skills in intercultural customer service situations, as well as language and communication skills. They thought that it is polite to know foreign cultures, in order to be able to communicate as naturally as possible. The interviewees found the ability to acknowledge or “read” the customer important, since with the help of body language and gestures customer servants might be able to discover attitudes, feelings and preferences.

According to the interviewees, lack of common language caused most challenges in intercultural customer service situations but unawareness of foreign cultures might also lead to problems. They suggested that these issues could be managed through training to avoid the challenges caused by them in the future. The Managers found that going through the customs of different cultures might be useful besides the language training. They also mentioned

that it would be far more important to remember that the differences between individuals are always greater than the differences between groups or cultures and that every individual is always unique and thus, assumptions based on the ethnic or cultural group one belongs to should be avoided.

In the Managers' opinion, the key to improve the personnel's abilities to serve foreign customers even better in the future would be to arrange training regularly. They found that besides expertise and language skills, customer servants should have knowledge about the customer's culture in order to achieve satisfactory intercultural customer service situations for both parties. Customer servants should also know where customers could find an interpreter or someone to help them with taking care of their issues if the lack of common language becomes a problem, even though customers who might not have a common language with customer servants usually arrive to the customer service desk already with an interpreter.

6.2 Document analyses

Document analyses were conducted to study the electronic customer service of foreign customers and the customer service on the telephone in the Case Company. The analyzed data included altogether 22 telephone calls in which customers had chosen "service in English" when calling to the customer service of the Case Company. However, the data included four tapes that were excluded from the analyses. Two of the tapes occurred twice, in one of the tapes the customer was actually Finnish and one phone call went straight to the customer's voice mail. Thus, the actual data that was analyzed included 18 telephone calls. The telephone calls occurred during a period of time from 31.1.2014 to 1.7.2014. The data included telephone calls from seven different customer servants of the Company. Two of the customer servants were in nine of the telephone calls and the rest five customer servants once or twice on the tapes.

Most of the telephone calls were related to moving. In nine from the eighteen telephone calls analyzed the customer was moving and either terminating his current contract or making a new contract. Four telephone calls were related to the current customers' contracts and three calls to invoicing. One phone call was related to debt collection. Some of the callers appeared to be foreign students. Students form a segment of foreign customers who regularly use the services of the Case Company and are experienced Internet users. In a few telephone calls foreign students told that they had already visited the Internet pages of the Case Company and concluded a contract there.

Few issues seemed to cause challenges to the customer service of foreign customers on the telephone. On the telephone, both the customer and the customer servant were able to use only their sense of hearing and speech. Customer service on the telephone did not allow the parties to use nonverbal communication or other techniques since they could not see each other. Thus, in several telephone calls customer servants needed to go through and ensure the same issues many times which sometimes appeared to cause frustration. The names of the foreign customers appeared to be especially challenging. In several telephone calls the customers spelled their names letter by letter, but since the English alphabets are different from the Finnish ones, the names needed to be ensured many times and this extended the duration of the telephone calls.

When calling to the customer service of the Case Company, customers needed to choose from a couple of alternatives what their issue was related to by pressing a certain number. Here they also could choose to be served in English. The customers who had chosen service in English could not leave a call back request but they needed to queue on the line until being served. Since it was not possible to leave a call back request, the English speaking telephone calls were served as fast as possible. However, some customers mentioned that they felt reaching communication to the customer service of the Company difficult trough the telephone and they needed to queue quite a long time before being served.

Lack of common understanding seemed to cause challenges on the telephone also. The Case Company operates in such a field of business that the customers and the customer servants sometimes needed a special vocabulary. Even though the customer servants had vocabulary lists in English with them during the telephone conversations, the customers did not always seem to understand the meaning of all words. Also, some of the customers mentioned that they had received letters from the Case Company in Finnish. Thus, the customers had not understood them and they needed to call the customer service to discover what the letters were concerning. It could be said that the customer service of foreign customers could be improved by contacting them with letters or forms that would be in English. This would decrease the foreign customers' need to call to the customer service in order to discover why they had been contacted by the Case Company.

The communication between the foreign customers and the customer servants on the telephone appeared to be polite and flexible. Even though both parties had sometimes difficulties to understand each other, both the customers and the customer servants expressed patience and went through the same issues as many times as needed to clarify the issues. The customers offered to spell their names letter by letter if a customer servant did not hear them right. Several foreign customers combined English and Finnish words in their speech to communicate more efficiently with the customer servants. Especially numbers, for example in addresses or dates of birth, were given many times in Finnish although the main language of the telephone calls was English. The customer servants seemed to consider the speed of their speech and pronounce the words very carefully. On the telephone, people cannot assimilate a lot of information at the same time. Especially when communicating on the telephone in a language which necessarily is not the native language of either party, it would be important to speak slowly and make pauses in the speech.

The foreign customers on the analyzed data appeared to be very polite. They thanked and expressed their gratitude towards the customer servants usually several times during conversations and used a lot of polite phrases, such as "have a nice day", at the end of the conversation. For the customer servants

using polite phrases at the end of the conversations did not appear to be particularly natural. However, one of the customer servants used those phrases spontaneously herself almost in every conversation analyzed and for example thanked the customers for calling.

The Internet pages of the Case Company were analyzed on August 2014 to examine the current electronic customer service of foreign customers in the Case Company and to study how electronic customer service of foreign customers could be improved in the future. The content analysis of the Internet pages focused on the material that was available in English and was targeted to private consumers.

On the home page of the Case Company there was the contact information of the customer service of the Company, information about their different products, current news and campaigns. At the top of the home page there were sections from which customers were able to move to creating an offer, making a new contract, finding information about the customer service, product counselling, joining as a premium customer, the basic information of the Case Company and the corporation the Case Company belongs to. The pages offered information about the Company's products, contract options, invoicing and terms of different contracts. There also was a link to frequently asked questions. In general, the Internet pages seemed to contain lots of information and customers could take care of several issues through the Company's electronic customer service. However, on the home page there was not a possibility to change the language into English. Instead, all these information were available in Finnish.

From the Internet pages of the Case Company basic information about the different products, rates, contract types and lengths as well as terms of contracts could be found in English. On a page where a customer could make a contract in English the product options were briefly explained. However, from every product option box there was a link to "read more" section. If it was chosen to read more of a certain product, a new window opened. In this new window there were descriptions of the particular product, detailed product information and a price list in English. Product information section included

explanations of different contract alternatives and terms of contract. Terms of different contracts opened as PDF files and the contract terms were explained in English. Compared to the Finnish pages the amount of information that was available in English was quite small.

The electronic customer service of the Case Company offered customers the opportunity to calculate an offer and make a contract in English through a contract wizard. The contract wizard was intended for private consumers and small companies or organizations in Finland. Comparing different product options and their prices by changing the length of the contract from a drop-down menu was possible in English. Customers could also choose several contract types for comparison and either print the offer or send it to an email address. The same contract wizard with the same information was also available in Finnish on the Internet pages. Basically, through the electronic customer service of the Case Company foreign customers could make new contracts and terminate their current contracts in English language.

The sections of the Internet pages of the Case Company that could be found in English were quite clear. The basic issues that one needs to know when making a new contract and the information that is required to fill in during the process of making a contract were stated clearly. The sentences that were used on the pages were quite short and easily understandable. However, after opening the home page of the Case Company, it at first seemed a bit unclear if there was any information available in English. The language selection could be found after first choosing "contract offer" from the home page which, accordingly, was entirely in Finnish. If the language selection would have been on the home page it would instantly have been clear that information in English was also available on the Internet pages.

Some inconsistencies could be found from the parts of the Internet pages of the Case Company that were available in English. Next to the contract wizard there was a box that included a summary of the offer that was created and showed the choices that were made, for example the product, price and contract type that were chosen. However, while the other information about the offer was in

English, the contract type was occasionally presented in Finnish in the summary box. The summary of the offer and a request to try “contract recommendation wizard” followed on the right side of the page. However, the “contract recommendation wizard” was only available in Finnish. This was stated also in the request. Customers were asked to fill in all the necessary information on the contract wizard while creating a contract. At the end of the contract creating process customers also had a possibility to join as a premium customer of the Company. In this context, there was a link in which customers were recommended to take a look at the benefits and read more of the Company’s premium customer membership. However, the link opened the premium customer page which was only available in Finnish. In order to create a contract, customers were required to tick boxes for authorizations before the contract could be registered to the Company’s system. For example, customers were required to choose that they had read and accepted the contract terms, cancellation instructions and the cancellation form. However, if customers chose to read more information about the cancellation policy the pop-up window that opened and explained the cancellation policy was entirely in Finnish.

It seemed that the Case Company had already considered their foreign customers and offered them basic information about their products and contracts and the opportunity to create a contract through the electronic customer service in English. Nowadays consumers search a lot of information from the Internet and thus, translating for example frequently asked question into English could answer consumers’ questions. As can be seen from the results of the analysis of the telephone calls and observations at the service desk, foreign customers often seemed to ask for information related to moving and new contracts, but also invoicing. At the time of the analysis there was basically no information available in English about invoicing on the Internet pages. Information that was also missing from the pages in English was the contact information and opening hours of the customer service. This information was available only in Finnish. In general, the electronic customer service of the Company offered lots of information for the customers but only a fraction of it was available in English at the time the analysis was conducted. However, with

relatively small improvements the electronic customer service of foreign customers of the Case Company could be improved.

6.3 Participant observations

Participant observations were conducted on five dates during a time period of four weeks on July 2014. Data was collected through observations during the author's shifts at the customer service desk of the Company during 8.00 a.m. to 4 p.m. Thus, the dates for data collection were chosen based on the duty scheme of the customer service personnel of the Company. During the five dates of participant observations customer service situations with foreign customers occurred altogether ten times. The customer service situations were divided somewhat evenly during the four dates of observations so that each day there was from one to two intercultural customer service situations. However, during the first observation date 2.7.2014 there were altogether four intercultural customer service situations. In five intercultural customer service situations from those altogether ten the customer or the customers were of Somalian origin. In two intercultural customer service situations the customers were of African origin and one customer was from Asia. Two times the origin of the customers remained unclear.

The issues that the foreign customers were taking care of could be divided into three categories. During the observation dates most of the visits of foreign customers were related to invoicing. Six times out of ten the visit to the customer service desk was related to invoicing. In two times out of these the customer had not understood the payment request he had received since those were only in Finnish. Three times the reason for visiting the customer service desk was related to moving. A customer or customers were moving to another apartment and needed a new contract. The topic of an intercultural customer service situation was once related to debt collection. These were the same issues that foreign customers mostly seemed to take care of on the telephone.

In nine intercultural customer service situations out of ten observed the main language in which the communication between a customer and a customer servant occurred was Finnish. One foreign customer was using English while visiting the customer service desk. However, in five of the intercultural customer service situations the actual customer did not seem to speak or understand Finnish. Instead, the customers came to the service desk together with a friend or a family member who was communicating with the customer servant in Finnish and then interpreting to the actual customer.

Few issues seemed to cause challenges to the intercultural customer service situations at the customer service desk of the Company. Lack of common language and inadequate language skills caused challenges to the customer service situations since understanding the other party was sometimes difficult. In addition, the Company operates in the industry where a special vocabulary is sometimes needed. Even though foreign customers were able to communicate in Finnish the vocabulary caused challenges. On the other hand, at the service desk it might have been easier to communicate even without common language since customers and customer servants were able to use also nonverbal communication. Few of times the author wrote down sums of invoices that the customers were expected to pay. Customers that were moving to another address brought their rental contracts with them and the author was able to see the addresses and other needed information directly from them.

In general, customer service situations with foreign customers at the customer service desk were pleasant situations for the author. Foreign customers who visited the desk were polite and friendly. The customers also smiled a lot and greeted the customer servant when they arrived and left the desk. None of the foreign customers who visited the desk during the observations was aggressive or expressed dissatisfaction. Even when the issue was related to debt collection the customer was very polite. Surprisingly, only one of the customers was communicating in English. Those customers whose language skills were inadequate came to the service desk together with an interpreter and brought documents, for example rental contracts, that helped the customer servant to receive the needed information.

7 CONCLUSIONS

The purpose of this thesis was to study how the customer service of foreign customers in the Case Company could be improved. The study focused on three main channels of customer service in the Case Company: telephone services, electronic customer service and customer service at the service desk. The objective was also to introduce ideas of how the intercultural customer service situations could be more pleasant for both the customer servants and the foreign customers. These objectives were reached and suggestions for improving the customer service of foreign customers in all three main channels of customer service were introduced. It can also be said that the results of the study supported the theory of the thesis quite well. The issues from the theoretical context of the thesis repeated themselves in the results of the study.

The results of the study indicated that the foreign customers of the Case Company were using all three channels of customer service and took care of the same issues through each service channel. However, it seemed that foreign customers visited the customer service desk and called to the customer service more than used the electronic customer service of the Company. The objective of the Company was to serve foreign customers as well and with as good quality as Finnish customers and some actions to improve the customer service of foreign customers had already been taken. For example, serving foreign customer on the telephone had been concentrated to certain customer servants who knew English language. The customer servants of the Company were also offered English lessons and training in which they went through professional vocabulary and customer service situations. The offer, contract and cancellations forms had been translated into English on the Company's Internet pages.

In general, in improving the customer service of foreign customers in the Case Company consistency would be important. The customer service provider should be aware of the preferences, behavioral norms and values of

multicultural customers and recognize that those affect the expectations foreign customers have towards customer service (Wursten et al. 2009, date of retrieval 14.6.2014). Creating a clear, consistent plan for improvements could be useful instead of single improvements. At the time the study was conducted, foreign customers contacted the customer service of the Company more by the telephone and by visiting the customer service desk than through the electronic customer service. Improving the Internet pages of the Company could persuade especially young people, for example foreign students, to use the electronic customer service more.

The results of the analysis of the telephone calls supported the view that serving foreign customers on the telephone had been concentrated to certain customer servants, since two of the customer servants performed in nine calls from the altogether 18 analyzed telephone calls. According to Performance Research Associates (2006, 68), the significance of body language on the telephone is far less than when meeting the customer on person and the messages are transmitted through voices. The inability to use nonverbal communication to support the communication, the lack of common language and English alphabets seemed to cause challenges to the English-speaking telephone calls. Also, since the customers who had chosen to be served in English could not leave a call back request, they needed to wait and queue on the line until being served. According to Ylikoski et al., the concept of queuing time is more critical with telephone services since the queuing time feels longer on the telephone (2002, 103–104). Thus, some of the customers mentioned that reaching service on the telephone felt difficult and they needed to wait quite long before being served. On the telephone the foreign customers appeared to be very polite and used plenty of polite phrases, such as “Have a nice day” at the end of the conversations. For the customer servants using and responding to the customers’ phrases seemed not to be particularly natural, even though also the customer servants were very polite. However, Ylikoski et al. (2002, 97) mention that a friendly ending salutation is also a part of good service.

As a conclusion, in improving the customer service of foreign customers on the telephone concentrating the English-speaking telephone calls to the customer

servants who know English language could be recommended. According to Wursten et al., customers in general do not appreciate poor language skills (2009, date of retrieval 14.6.2014). Thus, English lessons and training the vocabulary and phrases would be important for the customer servants. In the lessons especially conversational exercises could encourage the customer servants to use their language skills.

According to Pesonen et al. (2002, 127–128), the Internet has become an important tool for customer service which serves customers as a fast channel of finding information. The results indicated that the Internet pages of the Case Company contained a lot of information for the customers of the Company but only a fraction of it was available in English. Foreign customers had clearly been considered, since offers and contracts could be concluded in English. There also was information about the products, contracts, rates and contracts terms available in English. Pesonen et al. (2002, 127–128) also state that electronic communication affects the reputation and the image of companies and unclear or inconsistent Internet pages are likely to give a negative image of a company to customers. Some inconsistencies could be found from the Internet pages of the Case Company that were available in English. Occasionally information that was expected to be in English was presented in Finnish. For example, customers were recommended to read more information about the benefits of a premium customer but the link, however, was directed to a page that was available only in Finnish. Information that was also missing from the Internet pages in English was the contact information and the opening hours of the customer service of the Company. Since the possibility to change the language was not on the home page finding information in English from the Internet pages was at first unclear.

The electronic customer service of foreign customers in the Case Company could be improved with relatively small improvements. Adding the possibility to change the language on the home page would state clearly that information is available also in English. Also the contact information and the opening hours of the customer service should be in English. Removing the minor inconsistencies concerning the language from the Internet pages would make the pages more

user-friendly. According to Pesonen et al. (2002, 129), it can be said that 20 percent of the information available could solve 80 percent of the customers' problems and creating a section for frequently asked questions to the Internet pages would be advisable. Thus, translating the frequently asked questions into English to the Case Company's Internet pages could be recommended.

During the time of the observations at the customer service desk of the Case Company, most foreign customers who visited the desk were of Somalian origin. Also customers of African and Asian origin visited the service desk. At the customer service desk the customers mostly took care of issues related to invoicing and moving. Two times the customers mentioned that they had not understood the payment request they had received since it was in Finnish. Surprisingly, in nine intercultural customer service situations out of ten observed, the main language of communication was Finnish. Five times the actual customer came to the service desk together with a friend or a family member who acted as an interpreter. According to Pesonen et al. (2002, 126–127), there are three main factors that could effect on an intercultural customer service situation: foreign language, cultural differences and the preconceptions the parties might have towards foreign culture. Lack of common language seemed mostly cause challenges in intercultural customer service situations at the service desk but on the other hand, both the customers and the customer servants were able to use nonverbal communication, gestures and facial expressions to support the verbal communication. In comparison to the intercultural customer service situations on the telephone, the opportunity to use also nonverbal communication seemed to make the customer service situations more natural.

Improvement in the intercultural customer service situations at the customer service desk could be achieved by defining the biggest cultural customer groups of the Case Company and going through their cultures, manners and habits with the customer servants. Knowing about the customers' cultures could help the customer servants to interpret their nonverbal messages and expectations and thus, to adapt the service accordingly. In general, understanding and considering cultural differences is important in the service sector and customer

servants should be able to understand that people from another culture see the reality from a different perspective (Pesonen et al. 2002, 127). Thus, training the customer servants to face customers from different cultures could prepare them for intercultural customer service situations at the customer service desk.

The Service Managers of the Company named several skills and features that are needed in excellent intercultural customer service. Customer servants should know foreign cultures in order to communicate naturally with foreign customers. Customer servants would need at least positive and friendly attitude, empathy, flexibility, patience and language and communication skills in intercultural customer service situations. The ability to acknowledge the customers was considered important, since body language could reveal the true attitudes, feeling and preferences of a customer. Challenges in intercultural customer service situations were seen caused mostly by the lack of common language and unawareness of foreign cultures. However, customer servants should not make assumptions based on merely the cultural group of a customer, since the individuals are always unique regardless of their cultural backgrounds. Regular training was seen as the key to improve the customer servants' abilities to serve foreign customers even better in the future and thus, create even more pleasant customer service situations for both parties.

8 DISCUSSION

The purpose of this thesis was to study how the customer service of foreign customers in a Case Company could be improved in practice. The study focused on three main channels of customer service in the Case Company: telephone services, electronic customer service and customer service at the service desk. The objective was also to introduce ideas of how the customer service situations could be even more pleasant for both the customer servants and the foreign customers of the Case Company in the future.

The study was conducted using qualitative research methods, such as interview, document analyses and participant observations. The objective of the interview of Service Managers of the Company was to provide information about the current situation of the customer service of foreign customers. Documents that were analyzed included the Internet pages of the Case Company and telephone calls from English-speaking customers. These analyses were expected to produce information about the electronic customer service of foreign customers and customer service on the telephone. Participant observations were conducted to observe the customer service of foreign customers at the customer service desk of the Company. The aim was first to learn about the current situation of the customer service of foreign customers and based on the observations, interpretations and the theoretical context, suggest how the customer service of foreign customers could be improved in the Case Company in the future.

As a result, improving the customer service of foreign customers in the Case Company could be done in several different ways. However, a consistent and comprehensive plan for improving the customer service of foreign customers could be useful. The main propositions for improving the customer service of foreign customers on the telephone were to continue to concentrate the English-speaking telephone calls to the customer servants who know English language, to arrange regular language training for the customer servants and to

allow the English-speaking customers to leave a call back request. For improving the electronic customer service adding the language selection to the front page, removing the inconsistencies concerning language from the Internet pages and translating the frequently asked questions into English were suggested. At the customer service desk of the Case Company improvements could be achieved by defining the biggest cultural customer groups and considering their manners. Also, going systematically through intercultural customer service situations with the customer servants could improve the level of customer service of foreign customers. Creating even more pleasant intercultural customer service situations for both, the customers and the customer servants, could be achieved by training the customer servants to face foreign customers. Perhaps choosing customer servants with good language skills and competent characteristics to serve foreign customers could be recommended.

In general, the author was satisfied with the execution of the thesis. All the research questions were answered and several ideas for improving the customer service of foreign customers and suggestions for achieving even more pleasant intercultural customer service situations for both parties in the future could be introduced. These improvements could be used in the Case Company in practice which was also important.

The thesis was completed faster than was expected. According to the original time table, the thesis should have been completed on November but was actually completed on August 2014. The research was conducted during the summer 2014 since the author was employed in the Case Company at that time. This perhaps affected the results of the study since more foreign customers usually contact the Case Company during springs and autumns. For example, the observations at the customer service desk could have been different on autumn when foreign students usually move.

The thesis was conducted using three different methods of qualitative research; an email interview, document analysis and participant observations. The main idea of this was to check the results by using different methods and thus,

increase the reliability of the research. Triangulation, or combining different methods in the same study, is sometimes said to serve as an alternative to the traditional criteria, such as reliability and validity, in qualitative researches. In the author's opinion, being employed in the Case Company and using three different methods in the study helped to increase the credibility of the study. The results of the study were affected by the author's employment in the Case Company, since it was not possible to entirely separate the author's own experiences from the research. On the other hand, qualitative research in general can be said to be affected by the researcher's interpretations and previous experiences. The previous working experience also offered advantage and saved time, since it was not necessary to start the research by learning the programs, products and practices of the Company.

The commissioner of this thesis was referred as the Case Company according to the wishes of the Company. Thus, the field of business was not published either. Similar studies had not been conducted for the Case Company before, even though the customer service of foreign customers had been considered in the Company. Due to globalization it can be expected that the number of foreign customers would increase in the future. Thus, improving the customer service of foreign customers would be important. According to the results of this study, regular training could be the key to improve the customer service of foreign customers in the Company. Besides language training, it could be useful to offer the customer servants of the Company education about different cultures and their manners and go through intercultural customer service situations in general. Investing in the electronic customer service of foreign customers can be seen important. Since foreign students form a major segment of foreign customers of the Company, improving the Internet pages of the Case Company in English could persuade them to be active online. In general, the concept of improving the intercultural customer service should be addressed in the Company as a whole.

In this thesis, the main focus was on finding ways to improve the customer service of foreign customers in three main channels of customer service. The point of view could also have been on the customers and their perceptions of

the customer service in the Case Company. The topic could also be studied for example by conducting a customer satisfaction survey and asking how foreign customers find the customer service of the Company. However, this kind of a study could require more time, since in order to a quantitative research to be reliable the sample should be large enough. Also, a study could be conducted in which the conceptions of the customer servants towards the foreign customers would be studied and their ability to serve foreign customers would be examined. An idea for thesis could also be to prepare a comprehensive plan of the customer service of foreign customers in a Company.

Conducting a qualitative research proved to be quite challenging but also rewarding experience. Qualitative analyses required surprisingly lot of time, therefore scheduling enough time for conducting the research was needed. Defining clear research questions at the beginning of the process helped to concentrate on relevant issues during the research process and prevented the subject from expanding too widely. Also, the theoretical context of the thesis was important since it guided the interpretation of the results and helped to ask the “right” questions. In general, the author was pleased with the subject of the thesis since it proved to be an interesting, current and versatile topic. The thesis project offered an opportunity to use the knowledge acquired during the studies in practice. Lots of work was needed to complete the thesis but finally, the author was pleased with the results of the work.

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1. Estimate, how much the company has foreign customers (e.g. percent out of all customers)?
2. Estimate, how much foreign customers are served through each customer service channel e.g. weekly
 - a. telephone services
 - b. electronic services
 - c. at the service desk
3. What kind of matters foreign customers usually handle through
 - a. telephone services
 - b. electronic services
 - c. at the service desk
4. How the customer service of foreign customers differ from the customer service of Finnish customers, or does it differ at all?
5. Do you think that foreign customers have different kinds of expectations towards customer service than Finnish customers have? If yes, how those expectations differ?
6. How do you perceive the customer service of foreign customers in the company at the moment?
7. What operations have already been done to improve the customer service of foreign customers in the company?
8. In your opinion, what actions are still needed to improve the customer service of foreign customers in the company?
9. Customer servants in the company were offered English lessons. Do you think it was useful? Do you think it would be useful to continue lessons?

10. How do you perceive excellent intercultural customer service?
11. In your opinion, what kind of skills customer servants need in intercultural customer service situations?
- a. language skills
 - b. communication skills
 - c. cultural knowledge
 - d. ability to read nonverbal signs
 - e. acknowledging (“reading”) the customer
 - f. ability to adapt to different situations
 - g. expertise
 - h. something else, what
12. In your opinion, which issues can cause challenges in intercultural customer service situations?
- a. lack of language skills
 - b. lack of common language
 - c. lack of communication skills
 - d. misinterpreting the other party
 - e. lack of cultural knowledge
 - f. frustration
 - g. fear or anxiety related to intercultural customer service situations
 - h. something else, what
13. In your opinion, how these issues should be managed to avoid challenges caused by them in the future?
14. In your opinion, how the personnel’s abilities to serve foreign customers even better could be improved?

15. In your opinion, which issues should be developed so that satisfactory intercultural customer service situations for both parties (customer and the customer servant) could be reached? Or is there anything that needs to be developed?

Customer servants' ...

- a. language skills
- b. communication skills
- c. ability to read nonverbal messages
- d. ability to adapt to different situations
- e. cultural knowledge
- f. expertise
- g. something else, what