Customer-support service in the relationship perspective

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Abstract

Purpose – The purpose of this paper is to describe customers' perception of customer support service related to the core service in telecomminucations customer relationships. The customers' perceptions of the support-service stem from their contacts with the support service and are related to the importance for the relationship with the telecommunications provider.

Design/methodology/approach – The study used a modified version of Switching Path Analysis Technique (SPAT) in its analysis to create the necessary data for carrying out a dynamic analysis – in other words customers' experiences of the customer-support service over time in their relationship with the service provider. The modification, called the SPAT mechanism, only focused on the difference between driving and non-driving factors related to the relationship strength.

Findings – From the service perspective it was found that some of the customers in the present study were particularly focused on the customer-support, which made it dominate the relationships. At that special time, their telecommunications service predominantly comprised customer support, which was more important than the core service. At other times, when the support-service focus was not as strong, the priority was likely to be different. Consequently, the composition of the telecommunications service and the core service is according to customers' expressions dynamic and only the customer perspective has the authority to define it.

Research limitations/implications – Research on service has been going on for several decades, and thus offers a great variety of findings from cross-sectional studies. Therefore, the present study's presentation of only one kind of service could be considered limited.

Originality/value – The paper provides useful information on customers' perception of customer support service related to the core service in telecommunications customer relationships.

Keywords Customer services management, Telecommunications, Customer relations

Paper type Research paper

Introduction

Regardless of whether companies consider themselves manufacturers or service providers, almost all of them nowadays offer customer support in some form. Despite the frequent presence of such a service, however, understanding of how customers experience its use in their interactions with companies is vague. Service can be a general issue or it can preferably be viewed as company-specific (Edvardsson *et al.*, 2005; Grönroos, 2006; Lovelock and Gummesson, 2004; Vargo and Lusch, 2004a, b) therefore, it is relevant to examine a specific service related to a specific industry, the kind that most industries have included in their offerings and most customers have experienced: customer-support service. Customer-support service in the present study counts on telecommunication and internet-based enablers.

The core service in telecommunications relies on infrastructure such as networks, and equipment for the use of broadband, fixed-line and mobile-phone service while the support service has the function of enabling and supporting the use of the core service and the resulting value in use (Vargo and Lusch, 2004a, b). Value in use is, in this study, used as an expression that embeds the relationship strength because the

approach to customers' evaluation of the customer-support service is linked to the continuation of the relationships. In this study the sample consists of customers that not only evaluated the customer-support function of the telecommunications company, but also regarded their evaluation to their relationships' strength. The contact to support service is mainly maintained by using fixed phone, e-mail or mobile phone (Telecommunications (New Zealand), 2006; Ofcom, n.d.). This means that the context of the support seen through the lens of the customer is the relationship with the telecommunications provider. The support contact is in that respect not separate from the core service in the customers' view, and both accordingly affect the relationship. In the telecommunications industry it seems that the decrease in personal interactions with company representatives, to some extent, has been replaced with an increased use of technology-based customer-support service. Customers used to have a natural support channel when they purchased an appliance from a shop, which simultaneously also provided the service when necessary.

The constellation comprising a technically complex core service and an "absent" personal contact, and incorporating a technique that also utmost important because it makes the use of the appliances technically possible, makes the customer-support service appear even more crucial. Not only is the support essential, the more complex core service the more necessary and almost obligatory for many customers is the support service; otherwise they would not be unable to use their appliances. The fact that the support is often physically detached from the core service has changed the "objective" reality in which, from the customers' perspective, the core service and the customer-support service are apparently deeply entangled. Technical developments in telecommunications have transferred the focus of most customer concerns to the telecommunications provider, which in turn has passed on the supporting function to separate departments, or even to detached companies such as call centers. However, the core service is still the reason why many customers contact customer support.

Customer support and relationships

The fact that the core service often causes customers to talk to the support-service personnel confirms the belief that customer support is related to the core service. This combination again raises the interesting question of how customers look at their support service. What is even more important is how this relates to relationship strength; i.e. is it the core product that is decisive or it is the support service when customers choose to either stay or leave the telecommunications operators?

The traditional way of looking at support as additional to the core service is the starting point in the service literature (Berry, 1983; Edvardsson, 1997; Grönroos, 1987, 1990; So and Tang, 1996). However, bearing in mind the fact that the customers' reality is that they need support for their mobiles, broadband or fixed lines, terms such as core and additional service might not be the most natural way of expressing and composing their concerns. Because of the changed realities; the core and the support now being separated units in customer interactions with the company, it would be logical that customers perceive them separated also regarding their effect on the relationships. If the customers separate the core and support service in their perceptions: does the perception include an spillover effect (Thorndike, 1920; Klein and Dawar, 2004) between the two? Is the possible spillover effect static meaning that support service always affects the core service or is it just the opposite?

In customer relationship research, customer support has often been viewed as isolated from the core service and studied focusing on, e.g. critical incidents resulting in complaining and switching. The impact of core-service failures on switching behavior was reported by Keaveney (1995) to account for almost half of all switching determinants. In their study on service encounters, Smith *et al.* (1999) included support service in terms of relating challenging encounters to satisfaction, the fact that process problems were more difficult to compensate than outcome problems indicating that customers perceived poor contacts as more problematic than problems with the core service and simultaneously that they separated them. What we do not know is how the pictures of the core and the support service were modified as a result.

What we do not know either is how the support and core service are embedded in customer relationships. The suggestion that any service model corresponding to contemporary telecommunications offerings may have to reflect the dynamism caused by the physically separated core and support service was made in the few studies on customer-support service that were found (Adria and Chowdhury, 2004; Richardson and Howcraft, 2006; Tuten and Neidermeyer, 2004). These studies focused on static elements such as the impact of visible or invisible queue lines on the support experience. However, the contact was in focus and the findings suggest that a static depiction of a support-service contact does not describe the situation aptly. Customer support may be best described and understood in dynamic terms. Therefore, one way of considering the aspect of the changed reality of core and support dynamically is to include the relationship aspects and focus on the roles of core and support service.

The purpose of this article is to describe customers' perception of customer support service related to the core service in telecommunications customer relationships. The customers' perceptions of the support-service stem from their contacts with the support service and are related to the importance for the relationship with the telecommunications provider.

Customer-support service

Therefore, the theoretical framework is built on early service models in order to give it direction and position. The model choices are not inclusive rather exclusive. The qualification for inclusion of the models was that they had to articulate the awareness of service as a complex matter consisting of several components. Thereafter, the focus turned to the particular function that maintained the customer-support service in companies, and this brought to light some significant customer perceptions regarding support service in telecommunications. Customers included in the study had contacted the support service that links the customers' narratives to complaining behavior. However, complaining behavior as such is delimited in the theoretical framework and no analysis is carried out with focus on complaining behavior in this study.

Another phenomenon that is close to the topic of the present article is the halo effect, or the "bias" due to one measure that spills over to another (Thorndike, 1920). For example, a negative perception of internet support may, or will, spill over to beliefs about the customer-support service in general and to other service from the same service provider. Klein and Dawar (2004, p. 203) discuss how corporate social responsibility (CSR) has a spillover or "halo effect" on otherwise unrelated consumer judgments, such as the evaluation of new products. Whereas the reported studies have focus on the effect of one evaluation on another the focus of the present study is on the

composition of the dimensions of the evaluated and its impact on the relationship. The present study looks at how customers compose the dimensions included in their perceptions of the company. Do they always consider support-service a supporting service or is the perception dynamic meaning that support-service sometimes may be the most important for the continuation of the relationships? In the latter case the supporting is the more important and in comparison with "halo effect" support service is not influencing any other perception it functions at that particular time as "the service".

Service models and the customer-support service
The models presented here were selected from the marketing literature and do not give a comprehensive picture of all those that have been published. One of the early ones, the Augmented-Service-Offering Model (ASOM), describes a framework that was designed for service development, and in which service is divided into three major components: core service, facilitating service, and supporting service (Grönroos, 1987, 1990). It is this model that provided the rationale for the present study, although its operationalization and the breaking down of service into separate, identifiable elements forming a unified whole are not exactly compatible with the ones put forward in the present study where customer-support service is suggested not only to be an additional service to the core service but may in a relationship perspective stand as the most important of the three. An inherent implication is, however, that service is perceived as a composite entity, and the elements may thus be indistinguishable when it is evaluated. Another important point is that an understanding of how the service composition is perceived by customers is crucial in determining the strength of the company's customer relationships.

Another early model was the one developed by Edvardsson (1997), the elements of which follow the same lines of thinking as the ASOM. The core and supporting service are perceived as responding to the needs of customers. These are divided into primary and secondary needs: the core service and the primary needs share one communication channel and the supporting service and secondary needs share another. The message conveyed by these models has frequently been followed by many companies, as demonstrated by the establishment of separate customer-service support units. However, how customers perceive the service when they evaluate it with effect on the relationships is quite a different question.

The connection between service and relationship dimensions was pointed out early on by Berry (1983). In discussing the various incentives that could be offered in order to retain customers, he emphasized the necessity of taking care of the existing ones. He suggested that there were five relationship-marketing strategies: core-service marketing, relationship customization, service augmentation, relationship pricing, and internal marketing. The implication in all five was that each customer should be considered individually, on his/her own terms. Ravald and Grönroos (1996) provide more insights in the same direction into the concept of customer-perceived value. They suggest that it is crucial for a service provider to understand the importance of customer perceptions of value. If customer satisfaction or dissatisfaction depends on value, it must consequently also depend on costs. If complementary service is constantly added to the core product, customer benefits are increased. However, the danger of thereby also increasing customer costs is obvious. Knowing how customers

perceive customer-support service in telecommunications is, according to the above, logic necessary for being able to build customer value-in-use.

Whereas some current studies follow the established tradition of service modeling, and divide them into core and support service, it is essential to consider the customers' perspective in any debate on service definitions (Edvardsson *et al.*, 2005; Lovelock and Gummesson, 2004; Vargo and Lusch, 2004a, b). The traditional view stresses the importance of not only focusing on the core service, but also of acknowledging how important the support service is, which often is the less discernible and the less dominating part of the entire service offering. So and Tang (1996) discuss these links in their study on service-support systems. The authors state that the unfair treatment of customer-support service regarding priority matters from the company perspective is apparent in the resource allocation between the core products, and the facilitating and the supporting service where support service often suffers.

In sum, the present study challenges the implication in earlier service models suggesting that support service performs and is defined as additional to the core service. Today, when telecommunications service is developing rapidly, the increased need for support is simultaneously built in. The consequence is that the support service may from time to time be perceived by customers as more important than the core service which again challenges the models referred to in this chapter, and furthers the dynamic view on customer-support service related to core service.

Customer-support service in telecommunications companies

In this section we discuss and give examples of how companies design and manage their customer-support functions. Queuing, whether visible or invisible, could be considered one aspect of a support service. Telephone queues for telecommunications service, for example, are naturally included, but there are also "real" queues that are not directly related. One of the aspects highlighted by So and Tang (1996) is the importance of handling queues satisfactorily in order to promote a more positive perception of the service. In other word, they assume that the support (queuing) is in a subordinate position related to the core (e.g. merchandises in supermarkets and loans, currency service in banks). Their research settings were supermarkets, banks and insurance companies with a core service and queue handling as an additional or support service. Their results clearly showed the impact of the length of the queue on the perceived service. In other words, what might be considered by the service provider to be a supporting service can by the customers be perceived a part of the service he/she considers to be the core service and even be the most decisive when linked to the relationship strength, which is the theoretical explanation of why a service can be abandoned because of long and slow queues.

The visibility of the service and the perception of it are discussed in other studies. For example, Ozment and Morash (1994) reported similar lines of thinking, but in their article visibility only referred to the core product. They found that the relationships between customer-perceived service quality, the core service, and peripheral service depended on visibility: the less visible the core service was to the customer, the less it was found to be significant in terms of customer-perceived quality. The same significance applied to the relationship between customer-perceived quality and visible peripheral service. To some extent there are the same kinds of problems in the telecommunications industry; customers are not always aware of the length of the

queues and in the cases they are the length seems obviously to impact the support service experience.

So and Tang (1996) present one more aspect on the perception regarding support service related to core service. When companies digitalize their functions they consider the support service less important than the core service. Hui *et al.* (2001) describe an intelligent fault-diagnosis system of customer support. Technically, the system may function faultlessly, but its functionality is not really considered from the customers' perspective: in a complex service such as telecom, automation may not always be the best solution.

In sum, the literature review shows how the core service and additional or support service may be perceived by customers.

The channels of the support-service in telecommunications. Making contact with the operator to which customers subscribe is no easy task in the telecommunications industry. Many operators only offer contact by e-mail, and others provide a queue-line for subscribers to obtain personal service. Although the customers' issues for staying in contact with the telecommunications provider may be of a very serious nature, such as being the target of malicious calls, sometimes no personal contact is provided (Telecommunications (New Zealand), 2006; Ofcom, n.d.), and the only contact offered may be related to complaints. According to one US newspaper report, the number of complaints to telecommunications operators is increasing rapidly (Kessler, 2003): Qwest Communication, Sprint, AT&T, and MCI all report the same trend. Some of them admit that they have seen up to a 300 percent increase in customer complaints. Complaint handling is obviously one aspect of the support service, but not necessarily the most prominent. Complaints seems, in connection to core and support service in telecommunications, to be a transporter or a channel of the support service.

When such huge numbers of all kinds of complaints have to be dealt with by these companies, the organization of the support function is a real challenge. Under these circumstances, it is understandable why companies develop self-services and self-service recovery solutions for incoming calls from customers. It is also obvious that, in the short term, the benefits to the company are likely to be substantial. However, in the long run the picture will probably be quite different. The huge increase in complaints could even be a sign of the long-term effects of automation. For example, if the automatically generated suggestions of help and support do not solve the customer's problems the consequence may be that the number of complaints doubles or triples. First the customers complain and may receive an inappropriate response. Their subsequent complaints are more likely to be via e-mail, and if they are still dissatisfied they will call and wait in the queue until they get a human voice. On this occasion they will complain not only about their original problems, but also about the problems they have encountered in trying to get in touch. The whole procedure causes an accumulating bundle of problems that are unmanageable in the long run. One solution might lie in the re-organization of the customer-support function. However, the successful realization of this reorganization requires an in-depth examination of the nature of the service.

Value-in-use and a relationship perspective. This section presents and discusses the links between the specific theoretical frameworks that support the purpose of our study (Edvardsson *et al.*, 2005; Lovelock and Gummesson, 2004; Vargo and Lusch, 2004a, b; Stauss, 2005).

Eggert *et al.* (2006) examined customer-perceived values in a recent article. Their contribution to the discussion on how customers' value-in-use is formed was based on a long-term study focusing on the significance of perceived quality for the continuation of the relationship. The ultimate question is whether it is the core product/service or the support service that is the most decisive for building and maintaining long-term relationships. The authors claim that it was not possible to establish the effect of the duration of the relationship on the perception of the core service as more or less significant in comparison and related to the supporting service. In other words, it is not a matter of course that customers consider the core product to be the most important when they continue their relationship with a company.

The studies referred to so far support static perceptions of the service with an assisting function of customer support. However, there are studies that tie in with the dynamic view. For example, the idea underpinning the notion of value-in-use (Vargo and Lusch, 2004a, b; Edvardsson *et al.*, 2005) is that when customers' views are considered relevant in service development or strategic decision-making it follows that customer-perceived perceptions rather than objective states have to take precedence in the design of the service composition. In other words, it is not beneficial to contrast core and support service, but it is the role of each in the customer relationships that is important. The perspective of the customer is fundamental in the determining of particular offerings, such as customer-support service, in order to facilitate the creation of value-in-use.

Hennig-Thurau *et al.* (2002) point out in their study on relationship understanding through marketing outcomes (customer loyalty and word-of-mouth) that customers look to factors other than the core service for perceived benefits. The authors refer to studies with a different kind of focus (on antecedents), in which antecedents such as customer satisfaction, perceived quality, customer commitment and trust (Fornell, 1992; Heskett *et al.*, 1994; Hennig-Thurau and Klee, 1997; Morgan and Hunt, 1994) have been found to affect outcomes. The interest in the present study is in the mechanism behind customers' evaluation processes in terms of distinguishing between antecedents categorized as driving and not driving the relationship when continuation (loyalty) is the concern.

In sum, the theoretical framework incorporates exclusive models of how the connection between the core and the supporting service has been dealt with (Berry, 1983; Grönroos, 1987, 1990; Edvardsson, 1997). The impact of the logic of these models on service studies is impressive. The technical developments in industry in general, and particularly in telecommunications, demand fundamental changes if the service is to fit the customers' world and their perceptions. It is not the evaluation of the support service as such with which the present study is concerned; it rather seeks an understanding of the dynamism, the interplay between the core and the support service.

Method and procedure
It is important to understand the concepts of process and change in order to capture reality as a concrete process (Morgan and Smircich, 1980). In the continuing debate on service definition (Edvardsson *et al.*, 2005; Lovelock and Gummesson, 2004; Vargo and Lusch, 2004a, b), it has been suggested that service could be seen as a process, as an activity, as deeds and interactions (Lovelock, 1991; Solomon *et al.*, 1985; Vargo and

Lusch, 2004b; Zeithaml and Bitner, 2003). The essential definitions that traditionally have been produced are difficult to examine and describe from a static perspective, which does not reveal the fundamental character of service: the process from the customer's perspective.

Given that service is considered a process aimed at creating value in use for customers, the first important step is to find tools for mapping it in such a way that it enables the inclusion of the context, the customer's perception of the relationship (Morgan and Smircich, 1980). Unless the context influencing the service is a natural and visible part of the analysis, important information is lost. If the object of study is examined by excluding the context, the findings will be limited because significant influencing factors are missing and this may confuse the results. When the perspective is that of the customer, he or she is the expert when it comes to determining the factors of the service in question related to the strength of the relationship. It is crucial to employ research techniques that have the capacity to include the context and to allow the customers' perspectives to show.

In our choice of method and analysis procedure we wanted to stress the capability of capturing the dynamism of customer perceptions. The priority we placed on demonstrating such a dynamic effect led to our adoption of a qualitative method that embraces the potential to comprehend the priority of the customers' view on the support or service regarding the continuation of the focal customer relationship. Schultze (2003) casts doubts in her study on customer perspectives and service relationships regarding the application of different technical solutions in seeking to understand the dynamism in relationships. Like her, we used qualitative methodology in assessing customer priority regarding the core and the customer-support service. The importance of customer support compared to the core service is thus assessed according to the strength of the relationships by asking customers not only about their evaluation of the core- and supporting-service, but also about the ultimate impact on the continuation of the relationships of each service.

Method
Finding out about the roles of customer-support and core service in telecommunications relationships requires a method that distinguishes the priority for the importance. We want to know how customers perceive support and core in terms of the significance for the relationship continuation.

The Switching Path Analysis Technique mechanism. The modified version of Switching Path Analysis Technique (SPAT) (Roos, 1999) is called the SPAT mechanism. This version has previously been successfully applied in studies similar to the present one (Roos *et al.*, 2005), which examined the role of customer clubs in telecommunications customer relationships. We considered it the most applicable in the present study, which examines the importance (roles) of customer-support service as related to the core service for customer relationships' continuation.

The SPAT mechanism (Roos *et al.* 2005) provides categories for distinguishing between the roles of different service for the relationship maintenance:

- trigger;
- process; and
- outcome.

With focus on customer-support service customer expressions direct the analysis in terms of the expressed importance of the customer-support service for the relationship: the first priority gave it a trigger position while the lower priority gave it a process position. The first priority (the trigger position) was assigned to customer-support service when customers said that they chose their telecommunications providers based on their support-service experience, for example, and the second priority (the process position) was assigned if the customer said it was important but that, for example, the price was more important.

The trigger position for customer support was thus determined when customers clearly indicated that the support was the reason why they stayed in the relationship. The process position was expressed in terms such as: broadband connections are the same regardless of the telecommunications provider. Another example of how the customers assigned priority to the support and core service was when they clearly stated that they chose their telecommunications provider according to the mobile connections (trigger), or that they never used the support service as a criterion (process).

The idea behind trying to get customers priority regarding support service and core service in a customer relationship is to try to understand the interplay between the two. In the case customers regard the core service such as the broadband connection as being more important for choosing a certain telecommunications operator and staying in the relationship: Do they always consider the core service more important than support service. On the contrary, customers that favor support service ahead of core service for their stay in the telecommunications relationship: Is it the permanent opinion? Simply, how does the interplay between support and core service appear (see Table I)?

Interview process
The department of the customer support service in a Swedish telecommunications company provided contact information for 734 customers who had stayed in contact with the department during 2001-2005. The customer support service department includes both the functions of customer service and after-sales functions. The customer service provides support, receives orders from the customers, acts as an intermediary for deliveries, and maintains a sales function. The after-sales function receives complaints from, for example, support, mobile sales, deliveries, and other similar operational divisions of the department. Customers who had contacted the customer support department and complained about problems with a delivery, or announced

Customer-support service and core service in telecommunications customer relationships	Theoretical status	Customer expressions
Trigger	Driving factor for the relationship strength	I choose my telecommunications provider because of the support service
Process	Important but not the driving factor for the relationship strength	Price is more important than support service when I choose telecommunications provider

Table I.
Theoretical status and customer expressions regarding customer-support and core service

that they needed help with broadband installation or with the performance of the broadband, were asked to grade the contact. SPAT-mechanism was applied to the interviews conducted with customers.

Customers were interviewed by a former student at Karlstad University with a Master's degree in Marketing. A total of 70 interviews were carried out. This person has successfully conducted similar interviews for the university in other projects. All interviews were recorded and transcribed separately for the analysis. The length of the interviews was between ten and 20 minutes (see Table II).

First, the interviews were initiated by asking "warm-up" questions about the customers' current relationships with the telecommunications operator. The customers were initially asked, for example, about how they look at their relationship with the telecommunications provider today, gradually the discussion was lead into how the customer considers the reason for the contact to have impacted the relationship. The next and second group of specific questions was about customer support service:

- "How did you perceive the interaction with the operator's support service?"
- "How would you evaluate the interaction?"
- "How do you generally perceive the customer support functions?"

The third group of questions focused on the relationship with the operator before the interaction and after the interaction. The fourth category of questions concerned the customers' idea of the ideal support service and the ideal support service in the future related to core. Fifth, we asked the customers to describe their perceptions of the impact of the interaction on the relationship and to relate the importance of this to the strength of the relationship and for the choice of operator. The fifth question group is important and can be seen as a confirmation of the third group of questions.

The interview process in sum comprised:

- Warm up questions.
- Specific questions about the support service.
- The relationship; the interaction and included factors, support service and core service.
- Future.
- The impact on the relationship strength.

Sample process profile	Announcement of trouble 1-2	Announcement of trouble 4-5	Delivery 1-2	Delivery 4-5	Total
Sample (*n*)	81	78	93	482	734
Number of customers called	79	65	69	43	256
Contacts	20	24	26	25	87
Interviewed (*n*)	17	18	18	17	*70*
Answer frequency (%)	25	37	38	58	34
Proportion of those contacted who were interviewed (%)	85	75	69	68	*80*

Table II.
The nature of the sample and the interview process

Analysis procedure
The procedure of analysis was based on the transcriptions and conducted by both
authors. The findings of the two analyses were compared and differences regarding
categorizations were agreed on. There were only a few differences in the
categorizations and there were no problems in achieving conformity between
categorizations.

The analysis was carried out in the following steps:

(1) The entire interview was read until the overall perception and focus of the
    customer regarding product or service was clear to the researcher: a trigger or a
    process. Customers included in the trigger category were determined regarding
    the ultimate importance of the support service related to the product service
    that had caused the interaction. The customers included in the process category
    related to support did not give the support service first priority when
    considering the strength of their relationship with the operator.

(2) The overall perception was divided into positive and negative perceptions, i.e.
    was the customer positive or negative towards the interaction with the
    operator's support service?

(3) The detailed focus of the customers' testimonials was derived from the
    interviews. Which were the symbols and expressions that the customer used
    when reflecting on the interaction (Morgan and Smircich, 1980)?

(4) Which are the customer-expressed dimensions of support service?

Findings
Regarding the predicted strategic dividing line of the customer-contact process, when
describing the support service the customers did not express themselves in similar
words and categories which means that the way the company had organized the
customer-support service did not equal the perceptions of the customers after their
contact and when asking them about the influence of customer-support service on
relationships. In the customer expressions the strategic classifications appeared as
dimensions of the customer focus (classification).

Customers divided the contact experience into:

- contact;
- contact person;
- occurred problems during the contact;
- assessment;
- outcome; and
- effect on the relationship.

Dynamism and customer-support service
On the basis of the findings we define customer-support service in telecommunications
as including the elements of: contact, contact person, problems during the contact,
assessment of the reason for seeking contact, outcome of the assessment, and the effect
on the relationship. The roles of individual elements and the character of the service in
terms of dimensions are presented in this section. Customer support service in
telecommunications is defined as an essential and integrated part of the total service

experience that the operator provides to its customers. The customers do not distinguish the support function from the core service. The logical consequence is that the service provided by the telecommunications operator as perceived by customers typically includes a mixture of features such as core and support. The combination of elements appears to be customer-specific and it is the customers' perceptions of the typical service that shapes the service concept, including all of its features. This is the definition of customer-support service, and simultaneously shows the importance of the customer perspective.

Positive or negative overall perceptions
The majority of the customers experienced their contact as generally positive (49/70), and the remainder as generally negative (21/70). The negative vs. positive experiences are notable when considered as a separate category. The experiences were based on the dimensions of the categories, and the positive and the negative did not always converge. In other words, a positive overall perception could include a negative dimension and vice versa. This finding made us return to the theory developed by Morgan and Smircich (1980), which stresses the importance of the appropriate method in achieving the research purpose. We noticed that the support service described by the customers was seemingly only a detached phenomenon: they communicated different features differently. For example, they were positive towards the contact person but negative about the outcome of the process. If we had not continued the analysis with a view to determining the priority of various elements for the relationship strength, we would perhaps not have gained the insight regarding the interplay.

Trigger customer-support service
Almost half of the customers consider customer-support service to be more important than the core service in their relationships. For 28 out of the 70 customer relationships in the sample of the study customer-support service is the reason why the customers stay in their relationships. Customers' trigger expressions i.e. expressions categorized according to their priority for the relationship continuation (trigger or process) were:

(1) absence of a customer-support service – no personal contact;
(2) absolutely important;
(3) the customer-support service does not function;
(4) a customer-support service is fundamental in the choice of broadband operator;
(5) the customer-support service is the link between the customer and the telecommunications operator;
(6) customer support is of primary importance in the relationship with the telecommunications operator;
(7) decisive – customer support and the product are inseparable;
(8) as important as price;
(9) no customer-support service – no value-in-use for the telecommunications product or service;
(10) evaluation of the customer-support service precedes the choice of telecommunications operator;

(11) the lack of a functioning customer-support service results in a switch from the
operator; and

(12) very important.

In the warming up questions customers divided customer-support service into:
Contact, Contact person, Occurred problems during the contact, Assessment and
Outcome. The quotations below illustrate some of the interviewees' expressions
belonging to customers that consider customer-support service to be more important
for the relationship continuation than core-service. The expressions are categorized
into the initial categories.

- *Contact*:

    They are nice and friendly but after that nothing happens.

- *Problems arising during the contact*:

    The helpdesk and the company's actions must be linked together. At the time of our
    interaction everything was separate, and no promises were kept. New problems
    occurred all the time.

- *Assessment*:

    They say it's because it rains. When the weather is dryer it's better. The problem with
    the cable has been going on for two years. Two technicians came and checked some
    transmission values. That didn't improve anything and our problems continue.

- *Relationship*:

    It is the customer-support service that is the link between me and the operator.

The dimensions were listed in alphabetical order. However, numbers 4 and 9
(driving-support and service) were the ones most frequently mentioned. Both of these
– "A customer-support service is fundamental in the choice of a broadband operator"
(4) and "No customer-support service – no value-in-use for the telecommunications
product or service" (9) – reveal the driving role of telecommunications support. The
focus in the customer relationships was on the support service, not on the product or
the attributes connected to it such as price, audibility or other features. When
evaluating the strength of their telecommunications relationships these customers saw
the support service as clearly standing out above the product image.

Process customer-support service
The major part of the customers in this study (42 out of 70) do not regard the
customer-support service as driving their relationships with the telecommunications
operator. The customer-support service is also important to these customers, but it is
not the driving force. Some of the "process customers" regard the support service as a
matter of course, without giving more thought to its function in their relationships with
the operator. Similarly, for other customers the support service does not drive the
relationships nor does it compete in importance with the price, although several said
that it is important to them.

- a positive dimension of the relationships;
- not so important for fixed telephony;

- customer-support service does not drive the relationships;
- very important but not driving;
- very important but the delivery is more important;
- customer-support service needs to function we cannot solve the problems;
- important but price is more important;
- the personnel is friendly but the service does not function;
- the personnel does not understand that they offer a service;
- important for the overall perception of the telecommunications service; and
- very important.

Below we illustrate some process customer-support service observations, again, they are divided into: contact, contact person, occurred problems during the contact, assessment and outcome or as customers categorized customer-support service in the initial question of the interview process:

- *Contact*:

    It was the worst service situation I ever have experienced. They kept on putting our call through to different persons but it was impossible to get any exact information. We kept on calling for 14 days. I had to get my problems solved privately; otherwise I would still be calling.

- *Problems during the contact*:

    The first contact person was OK. The team that planned solutions to the problems was not. New problems occurred during the series of calls with different persons.

- *Assessment*:

    The contact person was friendly but the person she put our call to, did not give the impression of being willing to co-operate with us at all. Nothing happened. Two days later we made a new attempt. Now the problem was solved without hesitation.

- *Relationship*:

    Today I avoid calling them. And if it had been possible, I would have switched operators and I will do that at the first opportunity. We did not have any fixed line during the two months it took them to fix the cable problems.

The customer expressions depicting customers' views of the support service that does not drive the relationships but does articulate an important aspect for the evaluation of the overall service is well described by number 6. It is also the most frequent of the customer observations, followed by numbers 7 and 8. A common opinion is captured by number 6: "The customer support service needs to function – we cannot solve the problems." Whereas number 7 expresses the secondary importance of the support service: "Important, but price is more important." The narrative number 8 differs from the others because of its negativity: "The personnel are friendly but the service does not function." This observation reveals that the reason for these customers to disregard the service is that they do not trust the service. Therefore, number 8 is quite significant for understanding the importance of the support service for relationship strength. It is not only the trigger dimensions that are of value for relationship strength. However,

the roles differ. Two differing roles, trigger drives the relationship, while the process moves it along. The divergence into positive and negative dimensions includes more information. The variation between these two dimensions is presented next.

Positive and negative customer-support service
When all customer interviews were included, taking into consideration the "positive or negative" perspective on their expressions, there was a clear difference between the trigger and the process categories of the support service. It is surprising how many of the process support service customers that appear to be positive (35/42), leaving only seven negative expressions. However, in the analysis of the process section it was mentioned that one of the three most frequent expressions was negative (number 8 "The personnel is friendly but the service does not function"). Regarding the trigger support service it is notable that it is rated equally between positive and negative (14/14). Thus, compared to the process support service, the trigger support service is more often rated as negative.

These findings become more meaningful when they are linked to the character of the sample. The disposition of the included interviews was that they were divided between customers who had rated their contact with the support service on the basis of "Announcement of problem" and "Delivery". Further, the sample contained subcategories within the two main categories, namely, a 1-2 rank or a 4-5 rank. The sample categories ranking 4-5 of both classes were mainly found in the process support service while 1-2 ranks had a trigger support service position. The result of the collated information is that customers seem to realize the function and importance of customer support service only when they need it badly and it does not work. Thus it appears that, until it fails in its function, customer support service is not seriously evaluated in customer relationships.

Discussion
It was surprising how well the customers were able vividly to describe their dynamic perceptions of the customer-support service in the telecommunications business. They perceived it as one feature of the service offered by their telecommunications operator. This service comprised various essentials for different customers, examples of which include fixed-line and broadband subscriptions, and from time to time customer support. From the findings of this study we have learnt that some customers consider the customer-support service to be the driving force of the relationship whereas others give it a more modest role.

We used a modified version of SPAT in our analysis to create the necessary data for carrying out a dynamic analysis – in other words customers' experiences of the customer-support service over time in their relationship with the service provider. The modification, called the SPAT mechanism, only focused on the difference between driving and non-driving factors related to the relationship strength. The difference is conceptualized as triggers (driving) and processes (not driving) the relationships. Customers influenced by triggers evaluate their relationships differently than those who do not testify to the trigger influence (Roos *et al.*, 2006). Examining the customer-defined support service in the light of SPAT produces a clearer picture. In the present study customers put the customer-support service into its context; the relationship with the telecommunications provider including all subscribed service.

However, the modified version of SPAT (the SPAT mechanism) only highlights expressions of the focus (support or core), and not the particular customer evaluations.

In sum, from the service perspective we found that some of the customers in the present study were particularly focused on the customer-support, which made it dominate the relationships. At that special time, their telecommunications service predominantly comprised customer support, which was more important than the core service. At other times, when the support-service focus was not as strong, the priority was likely to be different. Consequently, the composition of the telecommunications service and the core service is, according to customers' expressions, dynamic, and only the customer perspective has the authority to define it. This is a crucially important insight, and is depicted in simple form in Figure 1.

Findings and referred service-quality models
Customer-support service can be viewed as an augmented, additional service to the core service as in the service-quality models that exclusively were reported in the theoretical framework (Berry, 1983; Grönroos, 1987, 1990; Edvardsson, 1997). Figure 1 depicts the dynamism that simultaneously is the difference between the reported service-quality models' way of looking at support and core service in comparison with the findings of the present study. Customers do not separate support and core in a static way in the telecommunications industry. The support service is by customers perceived as a part of the core service, which at the particular time causes the need for and the contact to support service. Customers do not see the support as a static separate function. Customers themselves did state it in the most describing way "I cannot use my core service if the support does not function, I can't solve the problems myself". Thus, the combination of core and support is not static. On the contrary, it appears according to different situations during the customer relationships. The most significant conclusion is that, although customers perceive both core and support service their relative importance for the relationship is not static.

Research contributions
First, our results suggest that customers do not make a distinction between the core service offerings on the one hand and the customer-support service in a static way. In the eyes of the customer the focus is on value creation, and both the core and the customer-support service create value. Second, again from the customers' perspective, the relationship is the platform of the service that embeds both the core and the customer-support service. Seemingly, telecommunications customers focus on the core rather than on the support service, the devices and their functionality being especially
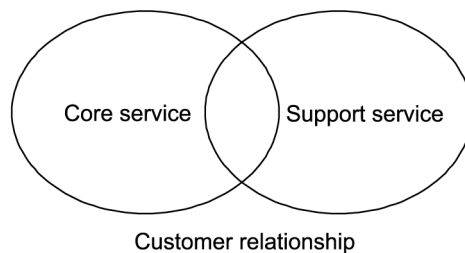

Figure 1.
The dynamic picture of customer-support and core service in customer relationships

Core service   Support service

Customer relationship

important in this industry. However, when the devices, the networks, do not function they will complain. The complaints are handled by the customer-support function/department, and it is in such situations that the service is tested. Indeed, they are "the acid test of service" (Johnston, 1996), and a favorable or unfavorable customer experience is thus a totality, a *Gestalt*, and is framed within the context of the relationship with the service provider. This *Gestalt* gives an unabridged picture to the customer of the dynamism between the core and the support service, and can apparently only be understood through taking a dynamic approach that separates it into its component parts and to which it assigns the roles in terms of the relationship strength.

Managerial implications
The focus in most companies is on the core product. In telecommunications companies the technical solutions and service are important, accordingly. The present study showed that from the relationship perspective the ultimate importance of the core service is not obvious. Consistent with the findings it is rewarding for the telecommunications companies to maintain a well functioning customer-support service. The reason is that for the relationship continuation not only the core service is important, but also the customer-support service, which was found to have a significant impact when customers choose telecommunications provider and also when they switch to other telecommunications providers.

The management of companies has the important issue of directing and allocating resources to different functions. The functions of customer service as seen from the management and the customer perspectives may differ substantially – a statement that is supported by the findings of the present study. Closely related to resource allocation are the requirements regarding the qualities of the customer-service personnel. If resource allocation is considered in the light of the findings of the present study, there are clear implications in terms of personnel qualifications as well as company strategies. Customer support is considered a feature of broadband service by customers, for example, the implication being that the support-service personnel should be qualified to answer technical questions at least to the degree it takes to become familiar with the problem. It was striking how the expressions of the customers regarding customer support service were categorized into groups with no connections to core service or to technical issues. The customer categories that merged during the interviews were: contact, contact person, occurred problems during the contact, assessment, outcome and effect on the relationship. Bearing in mind the objective importance of core service and technical solutions for the telecommunications industry the importance of understanding the customers' view of customer-support service must contribute to the strategic information needed for managerial decisions.

Most customer-support service today is handled in physically and administratively detached departments with clear boundaries from other functions. The knowledge and qualifications of the personnel are usually either interaction- or IT-focused, and include organizational capabilities. From a relationship perspective, these characteristics are not sufficient. In order to retain customers and strengthen relationships, the contact personnel in the customer-support service should be treated as crucially important individuals who need support and attention from the company. In particular, they should have a very close commitment to the service to which they are giving support.

Future research

The suggestions for future research arising from the findings of this study have validity for service research in general. It is obvious that, as the results of previous research have shown (Edvardsson *et al.*, 2005; Lovelock and Gummesson, 2004; Vargo and Lusch, 2004a, b), the dynamic perspective is rewarding as the focus of empirical studies. It is our conviction that the choice of empirical method is partly responsible for the reluctance to extend the implementation of the dynamic view into research. Another quite different reason is the lack of interest in the time factor as an important concept in service research. Our suggestions for future studies have been highlighted by Berry *et al.* (2002), but from a different perspective. Research providing understanding for roles of different service dimensions in customer relationships should include and deal with time. More comprehensive description of service as an aspect of customer relationships (Berry *et al.* 2002) is simply inseparable from the time concept. Rather than producing static service descriptions combined with a view of customers as a uniform group, the dynamic view takes into account customers as individuals, without losing control of methodologically important aspects such as the ability to describe mechanisms accurately and precisely.

Limitation

Research on service has been going on for several decades, and thus offers a great variety of findings from cross-sectional studies. Therefore, the present study's presentation of only one kind of service could be considered limited. However, the empirical material is quite extensive. Extending the research to cover several kinds of service would have been difficult in practice. However, a viable development might be to carry out investigations that are cross-sectional in character. In any case, we are aware that, as customer support is part of most customer service, it is a limitation to focus on one single industry. It is when findings from different studies are combined that new theoretical insights arise, as demonstrated in this study.

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