

# **The Personal Touch in Customer Contact: The Influence of a Personal Approach on Customer Relationships and Customer Experience**

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**Abstract:** *Customer-supplier relationships are becoming more digital. However, a personal approach still seems to be a key success factor in the service journey, creating an optimal customer experience. In this research, we investigated the effects of a personal communication approach on customer experience and customer relationship. The personal touch was operationalised in two studies focusing on written forms of communication (Study 1) and spoken forms of communication (Study 2) amongst customers of an energy company. Both studies show that a personal tone of voice in customer contact results in a more positive customer experience (in terms of consumption emotions, customer satisfaction and recommendation intention). However, it does not impact the long term relationships between service provider and customers. Customers do not adjust previously built relationship norms when they are approached in a more or less personal way, as long as the chosen approach does not violate relationship norms. The research is relevant for organisations interested in the effects of a more personal approach in customer contact. The paper combines existing theories on customer experience and customer communication with the existing theories on relational models.*

**Keywords:** *customer experience, customer contact, customer relationships, personalisation, digital transformation.*

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## **I. Introduction**

An important insight in the world of services marketing in the last decades is the increasing awareness of the importance of customer experience. A vast number of studies (e.g., Pine & Gilmore, 1998; Reichheld, 2006; Reichheld & Markey, 2011; Schmitt, 2003; Shaw, 2007; Smith & Wheeler, 2002) have shown that judgments about customer satisfaction and processes that follow the purchase (such as complaints management and word-of-mouth advertising) are influenced by the experiences of customers. Much research has been conducted into the determinants of customer experience, such as social environment, service interface, and environmental influences (e.g., Brunner-Sperdin & Peters, 2009; Verhoef, Lemon, Parasuraman, Roggeveen, Tsiros, & Schlesinger, 2009). None of these studies mention relationship norms as a possible determinant of customer experience. The social exchange theory and marketing research suggest that consumers' relational experiences with a company are guided by underlying relationship norms (Aggarwal & Larrick, 2012). Recent research (authors, 2019) also showed that the relationship norms used by a customer are an important factor in customer behaviour and customer experience.

One of the most important conceptualisations of relational models in the social sciences is the Relational Models Theory (RMT; Fiske, 1991). The RMT states that people use relational models to structure and evaluate relationships. The theory has been extensively tested and has received support in a great number of studies in different cultures. These studies have focused mainly on interpersonal relations. In the latest decade the theory has also been validated for issues in a business environment (e.g., Aggarwal, 2004; Kaltcheva & Parasuraman, 2009; McGraw, Schwartz, & Tetlock, 2012; McGraw & Tetlock, 2005; Wan, Hui, & Wyer, 2011). A relational model can be seen as a coherent set of relationship norms, values, and beliefs. Relationship norms provide an indication of how the relationship should be; values are an indicator of what is important in the relationship and beliefs provide us with information about how the relationship is experienced.

The RMT distinguishes four elementary relational models: Communal Sharing (CS), Market Pricing (MP), Authority Ranking (AR), and Equality Matching (EM). In the present studies we focus on the relational models CS and MP, as these models appear to be most present in customer-supplier relationships (authors,

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2019). In CS there is a common interest and/or solidarity between the parties within the relationship. Parties invest something in the community and get something out of it, without monitoring the size of the investment and the return on this investment. Parties want to connect with each other because they want to share their personal characteristics, or because they want to share each other's resources. In MP, the participating parties use a common value (usually money) to determine the value of the investment and the return on investment. A good cost-benefit ratio is essential in this kind of relationship.

Previous research (authors, 2019) showed that customers use elements of all the relational models in their relationship with an organisation. It also showed that the CS relational model has a clearer and significantly more positive relationship with customer experience than MP. As the presence of CS increases, customers feel happier and more hopeful, contented, optimistic, and encouraged. Furthermore, as CS relationship norms become more present, customers become less frustrated, irritated, and discontented. Customers who are inclined towards CS relationship norms are generally also more satisfied and have a higher recommendation intention than customers who are inclined towards MP norms. Knowing that relationship norms have a distinctive influence on customer experience, an interesting question is how a personal touch in communicating with customers impacts relationship norms and customer experience. This research describes the outcomes of two studies into the effects of a personal approach on relationship norms and customer experience.

## **II. A Personal Approach in Service Processes**

Research by Brunner-Sperdin and Peters (2009) showed that humanware — the people who provide a service — has more influence on the emotional experience of customers than typical hardware, such as the environment in which the service is provided. The nature of the interaction between customers and service employees is recognised as a critical influencer of customer satisfaction (e.g., Bitner, 1990; Czepiel, 1990). What this nature exactly is and what organisations have to do to expose this nature, is much less clear. A successful service encounter is often interpreted by organisations as a more personalised service, which results in a competition between companies as to who is most friendly to the customer. A personal approach refers to the empathetic behaviour of employees when in contact with customers, especially in spoken forms of contact. In 1987 Surprenant and Solomon introduced the concept of personalisation. In their conceptualization, personalisation means that the contact changes from a more formal, business-like contact into a more personal, intimate contact (Adelman & Ahuvia, 1995; Surprenant & Solomon, 1987). In the latter, the contact with the customer is improved because the customer is recognised as a unique person and not as an anonymous customer. There seems to be consensus among service providers that personal service is something that customers want, but there is little consensus on what personal service really means. This often involves a friendly smile, eye contact, a friendly greeting or calling someone by name. It may also involve some attention, time spent with the customer, small talk, and showing interest in the customer.

Nowadays the concept of personalisation has a somewhat different meaning than in the time Surprenant and Solomon introduced the concept. At present the concept of personalisation is often used by people working in data analytics and digital transformation. Personalisation in the context of process mining, data mining and text mining mainly means that automated messages and service encounters are aligned with personal characteristics of customers (like their motivations, emotions and cognitive styles). 'Personalised' in this context does not necessarily also have to be experienced by the customer as 'personal'. In the present research we propose that a relative simple personal approach in customer contact such as a personal tone of voice in customer communication, impacts customer experience and satisfaction.

What is very interesting however in the research of Surprenant and Solomon (1987) – and what is still very useful for contemporary research into possibilities of personalisation – is that they distinguish two types of personalisation: outcome personalisation and process personalisation. The first involves the personalisation of the outcome of the service, such as an appointment confirmation, a letter with information about a product, or a ticket for a theatre show. The second involves the personalisation of the process, for example, telephone contact with an employee. The concept of process personalisation makes a distinction between programmed personalisation and customised personalisation. Programmed personalisation mainly concerns pro forma courtesy. Customers have the impression that they are receiving a personalised service. Service employees are, for example, encouraging small talk and using the name of the customer. With customised personalisation, service employees emphasise the desire to help customers by finding the best solution for their needs. Previous research (Surprenant & Solomon, 1987) showed that programmed personalisation (non-functional small talk) in a financial services environment had a negative impact on customer expectations about, for example, competence, confidence, and effectiveness. Customised personalisation was found to have a positive impact on the customer experience and mainly in respect to the dimension of friendliness. The present research describes two studies. The first study examines the effect of a form of outcome personalisation, the second study measures the effect of a form of customised personalisation. Our hypotheses suggest that both forms of

personalisation will have a positive effect on customer experience.

The contact with the customer has become an important source of knowledge about the customer. In the marketing literature, listening to the customer has long been seen as an important competitive factor, but only with the growing number of contact centres has this been brought in practice more widely. A study by De Ruyter and Wetzels (2000) investigated the influence of listening behaviour on the customer experience and suggested that attentiveness reflects "the extent to which customers receive verbal and nonverbal cues from call center agents during the telephone service interaction" (De Ruyter & Wetzels, 2000, p.277). Their research shows that attentiveness is a direct influencer of the customer's evaluation of the services. Attentiveness is a form of (personal) commitment to the customer. In the second study described in this paper we added attentiveness into a telephone call between an employee and a customer. Attentiveness can be seen as a form of customised personalisation.

### **III. Customer Reactions to a Personal Approach**

A compelling question is whether the way that customers see the relationship with the organisation, and the relationship norms they maintain in this relationship, affect their response to a more or less personal approach. It is to be expected that the relational models used by customers in the relationship with an organisation have an effect on the impact of a personal approach on customer experience. Customers who use Communal Sharing (CS) relationship norms (Fiske, 1991) have a different idea of what fits within the relationship than customers who use MP relationship norms. Too much personal involvement, for example, can be contrary to the norms set by the customer in a commercial relationship with the organisation and can be seen as a form of taboo trade-off (Fiske & Tetlock, 1997/2015). Taboo trade-offs are cognitively taxing and emotionally unpleasant (Fiske & Tetlock, 1997; Tetlock, Kristel, Elson, Green, & Lerner, 2000). Taboo trade-offs lead to attempts to reinforce the norms that had been violated by the taboo trade-off (Tetlock et al., 2000).

Another compelling question is whether customers will change the relationship norms when faced with a personal approach in a business environment. In the present research customers are faced with various forms of written and oral contact. The customers that participated in the different studies were customers who already had a relationship with the organisation. If we follow the theory of taboo trade-offs (Fiske & Tetlock, 1997/2015), a business-like, non-personal approach will fit perfectly within an MP relationship but not within a CS relationship. Customers that apply CS norms in the relationship with the service provider will not appreciate a business-like approach or may even experience such an approach as a violation of the relationship norms. On the other hand, a personal approach fits well within CS. A personal approach will not be found disagreeable by MP customers as long as the approach is not too personal. In the latter case, it is expected that MP customers will see the approach as a violation of relationship norms.

A personal approach will probably function as a prime for the CS relational model, a business-like approach as a prime for the MP relational model. As long as a more personal (CS) approach fits within the relationship norms used by the customer, whether this is CS or MP, this is expected to lead to a strengthening of the CS component in the relationship and thus to a better customer experience. Recent research (Li, Tao & Wu, 2020) shows that whether positive relationships would mitigate or aggravate the failure is dependent on the specific nature of the relationships (exchange or communal) and the perceived controllability of the failure (low or high). A business-like, non-personal (MP) approach will lead to a strengthening of the MP component in the relationship. Based on previous research results (authors, 2019), we can assume that strengthening MP will have little or even a negative effect on the customer experience. However, an approach that is too personal will lead to a strengthening of MP, an approach that is too business-like will lead to a strengthening of CS. In both cases, the violation of relationship norms will lead to a less favourable customer experience. Based on this we propose that:

Hypothesis 1: A personal approach in customer contact will lead to a more positive customer experience (in terms of letter or call evaluation, consumption emotions, customer satisfaction and recommendation intention) compared to a business-like, non-personal approach and will strengthen CS relationship norms.

Hypotheses 2: A business-like, non-personal approach in customer contact will lead to a less positive customer experience (in terms of letter of call evaluation, consumption emotions, customer satisfaction and recommendation intention) compared to a personal approach and will strengthen MP relationship norms.

To test the hypotheses, two studies were conducted in which we investigated the effects of a personal approach on written forms of communication (Study 1) and spoken forms of communication (Study 2). The first study examines the effects of outcome personalisation, the second study examines the effects of customised personalisation. The studies were performed amongst customers of an energy company

## Study 1

### A Personal Approach in Written Customer Contact

#### IV. Method

For this study we developed, in cooperation with the energy company, two letters to confirm a change of address. The first letter included a personal addition from the director of customer service, the second letter a business-like one. The business-like letter not only mentioned the amount of money the customer had to pay each month, but it also specified exactly how this monthly payment was made up. The personal letter only mentioned the monthly payment together with the invitation to call if something was not clear. The business-like letter was signed in a formal way with the initials and surname of the director of customer service, the personal letter was signed in a more personal way with the name and surname of the director. The personal letter ended with the text "We are happy to help you". A director who signs with his or her name probably makes a more personal impression than a director who signs with "Mrs." followed by initials and surname. To verify that the personal letter was actually experienced as more personal, a pretest was conducted amongst 190 customers of the energy company. Some of these customers received the personal letter, other customers received the business-like letter. The customers were asked to rate the letter on a 7-point scale (1 = *not at all personal / business-like*, 7 = *very personal / business-like*). A one-way ANOVA confirmed that the personal letter was experienced as significantly more personal than the business-like letter ( $M_{\text{PERSONAL}} = 4.92$ ,  $SD = 1.32$ ,  $M_{\text{BUSINESS}} = 3.48$ ,  $SD = 1.27$ ,  $F(1, 189) = 59.22$ ,  $p < .001$ ). The business-like letter was experienced as significantly more business-like than the personal letter ( $M_{\text{PERSONAL}} = 4.73$ ,  $SD = 1.52$ ,  $M_{\text{BUSINESS}} = 5.23$ ,  $SD = 1.45$ ,  $F(1, 189) = 5.51$ ,  $p < .05$ ).

Customers from one of the largest energy companies in the Netherlands were recruited to participate in the study (142 men, 42 women, 41 gender unknown,  $M_{\text{age}} = 54.7$  years,  $SD = 13.77$  years). Participants formed a representative sample of the customer database of the energy company. Of the 225 customers, 57 received a personal letter, 57 a business-like letter, and 111 customers were in the control group (and did not receive either letter). After reading the letter, customers were asked to fill in a questionnaire.

#### V. Measures

First, customers were asked to evaluate the letter. They were asked to indicate on a 5-point scale what impact the letter had on their customer experience (1 = *very negative*, 5 = *very positive*). To measure consumption emotions we used a selection of the Consumption Emotion Set (developed by Richins, 1997). Based on the results of a previous study (authors, 2019), we selected 10 emotions that are most common in a customer-supplier relationship. These emotions were: frustrated, irritated, discontented, unfulfilled, fulfilled, contented, optimistic, encouraged, hopeful, and happy. Using a 5-point scale, customers could indicate the extent to which the relevant emotion was applicable to their relationship with the energy company (1 = *not applicable at all*; 5 = *very applicable*). Customer satisfaction was measured as a single-item. Customers were asked to indicate on a 10-point scale their overall customer satisfaction with the energy company (1 = *very unsatisfied*; 10 = *very satisfied*). Recommendation intention was measured on a 10-point scale. Customers were asked to indicate to what extent they were willing to recommend the energy company to friends and acquaintances (1 = *not at all willing*; 10 = *very willing*). To measure the CS and MP relational models, we used a list of statements based on Haslam and Fiske (1999). For each statement the respondent could indicate on a 7-point scale whether the statement was appropriate for the relationship with the energy company (0 = *not applicable at all*, 6 = *very applicable*). In a previous study (authors, 2019) the original statements were translated from English into Dutch (and back-translated from Dutch into English to check whether the translation was correct). After translating the statements into Dutch they were slightly modified to make them more applicable to a business relationship. (five statements for CS, four statements for MP) \ The relational model CS was measured with 5 statements. Examples of the statements are "If the organisation needs something from me of if I need something from the organisation, it will be given without expecting anything in return" and "The organisation and I feel a moral obligation to be kind and compassionate to each other". The reliability of the five statements was acceptable ( $\alpha = .83$ ). The reliability for the statements used to measure the presence of MP was not acceptable ( $\alpha = .52$ ). Removing one or more statements did not result in a higher reliability. Because the statement, "The interaction between the organisation and me is strictly rational: we both calculate what our payoffs are, and act accordingly", represented best what the MP relational model stands for, we used this statement as a single item to measure the presence of MP.

#### VI. Results

**Letter evaluation.** Customers who read the personal letter thought that this letter makes a more positive contribution to the experience with the service provider ( $M_{\text{PERSONAL}} = 3.72$ ;  $SD = .77$ ) than did customers who read the business-like letter ( $M_{\text{BUSINESS}} = 3.14$ ;  $SD = .77$ ;  $t(112) = 4.02$ ,  $p < .05$ ). Since

customers from the control group saw no letter they were excluded from this analysis.

**Consumption emotions.** We performed a one-way ANOVA to analyse the effect of the manipulation (business-like letter, personal letter, no letter) on consumption emotions. From the results in Table 1 it can be deduced that for all positive emotions (contented, optimistic, encouraged, happy, fulfilled, and hopeful) customers who received the personal letter were more positive than customers who received the business-like letter. In almost all positive emotions there was also a significant difference in emotional experience between customers who read the business-like letter and the control group. Customers in the control group had a more positive emotional experience than customers who read the business-like letter. Apparently, for customer experience it is better not to send a letter than to send a business-like letter. Surprisingly, for the negative emotions there are no significant differences. A business-like letter does not lead to more negative emotions than the personal letter, but it certainly leads to less positive emotions.

#### **Insert Table 1 about here**

**Customer satisfaction and recommendation intention.** A one-way ANOVA showed that customers who read the personal letter were more satisfied than customers who read the business-like letter ( $M_{\text{PERSONAL}} = 6.81, SD = 1.73; M_{\text{BUSINESS}} = 6.00, SD = 1.71; M_{\text{CONTROLE}} = 6.48, SD = 1.74, F(2, 222) = 3.16, p < .05$ ). The same applies to recommendation intention: customers who read the personal letter were clearly more willing to recommend the organisation than customers who read the business-like letter ( $M_{\text{PERSONAL}} = 6.05, SD = 2.09; M_{\text{BUSINESS}} = 5.18, SD = 2.23; M_{\text{CONTROL}} = 5.86, SD = 2.16; F(2, 222) = 2.69, p < .05$ ). Customers who read the business-like letter were less satisfied and less willing to recommend the company than customers who read the personal letter or who did not read either letter.

**Influence of manipulation on relational models.** A one-way ANOVA showed that in the minds of customers who read the business-like letter, CS is significantly less present than in the minds of customers from the control group who did not see either letter ( $F(2, 222) = 3.58, p < .05$ ). For the MP relationship, no significant differences were found between customers who read the personal letter or the business-like letter and customers in the control group ( $F < 1$ ).

Study1 found only partial evidence for Hypothesis 1 — a personal approach in customer contact leads to a stronger presence of CS and a more positive customer experience. The personal letter did not lead to a stronger presence of CS, but it did lead to a better customer experience. No support was found for Hypothesis 2 — a business-like approach to customer contact leads to a strengthening of MP. The business-like letter did not lead to a strengthening of MP but rather to a weakening of the CS relational norms. This could be an explanation for the fact that the business-like letter has a less positive effect on customer experience as well. The personal letter clearly led to a more positive customer experience than the business-like letter. We see this result not only in the evaluation of the letter, but also in consumption emotions, customer satisfaction, and recommendation intention. The personal letter clearly leads to a better customer experience, but this does not depend on the relational model used. From the fact that the business-like letter does not lead to a strengthening of CS and that the personal letter does not lead to a strengthening of MP, it can be concluded that there was no question of a violation of relationship norms in this study ("taboo trade-off"). The personal letter apparently does not exceed the norms of what is acceptable for customers who adhere to CS. The same applies to the business-like letter. This letter does not exceed the norms of what is acceptable for customers who adhere to MP.

### **Study 2**

#### **A Personal Approach in Customer Contact by Telephone**

*The first study makes clear that a difference in written communication with the customer — personal or business-like — can lead to differences in customer experience and to differences in relationship norms. In the second study we examined whether these effects also occur if the information is not offered in written form but is presented in oral form: what is the influence of a personal versus a business-like telephone call on the customer experience. The personal telephone call is an example of customised personalisation (Surprenant & Solomon, 1987). In the personal conversation between service employee and customer the employee gives more attention to the customer and shows understanding for the situation of the customer.*

### **VII. Method**

The study consisted of a between-groups design with one independent variable with three levels (personal call, business-like call, no call). The manipulation implied that customers heard a telephone call between a customer and an employee of an energy company. The conversation was about an increase in the

monthly payment. Part of the group heard a conversation that was personal in nature, and another group heard a conversation that was business-like and non-personal. The third group of customers did not listen to a telephone call. This last group formed the control group in the study. After overhearing the conversation, customers were first questioned about how personal or business-like they judged the conversation to be (manipulation-check). They could score on a 7-point scale (1 = not at all personal / business-like, 7 = very personal / business-like). A one-way ANOVA showed that the personal call is clearly viewed as more personal ( $M_{\text{PERSONAL}} = 5.00$ ,  $SD = 1.56$ ;  $M_{\text{BUSINESS}} = 2.55$ ,  $SD = 1.68$ ;  $F(1, 132) = 76.65$ ,  $p = .00$ ), and the business-like call is clearly viewed as more business-like ( $M_{\text{PERSONAL}} = 4.43$ ,  $SD = 1.79$ ;  $M_{\text{BUSINESS}} = 5.94$ ,  $SD = 1.29$ ,  $F(1, 132) = 30.87$ ,  $p = .00$ ). The manipulation can therefore be seen as successful.

The investigation was held with 231 customers of the same energy company as the company that participated in the first study. 67 Customers heard the personal telephone call, 66 customers heard the business-like telephone call. 98 Customers were part of the control group that did not hear any telephone call. 142 Customers were male and 59 were female. The gender of 30 customers was not known. The average age of the customers was 57.5 years ( $SD = 14.61$ ). Participants formed a representative sample of the customer database of the energy company.

For this study we developed, in cooperation with the energy company, two scenarios: two different telephone calls between an employee of the energy company and a customer. In the first case the call was handled in a business-like way, in the second case in a personal way. The reason for the telephone call was a request from the customer to increase his monthly payment. Two employees of the energy company conducted the interviews. One employee played the role of the customer and the other employee played the role of contact centre employee. To neutralise the impact of the voice on the customer experience, the same person played the role of the employee and the customer in both conversations. In the personal telephone call the employee introduced herself as Ingrid van der Meulen (fictional name), in the business-like telephone call as Mrs. Van der Meulen. In the personal telephone call the employee showed interest in the background to the customer's request: the customer wanted to increase his monthly payment because his cousin had come to live with him for a while; in the business-like call the employee was not interested in the background to the request. At the end of the personal telephone call the employee asked the question, "Has my answer taken away your concern for an extra payment at the end of the year?" This question was not asked in the business-like telephone call. Upon completion of the personal telephone call the employee took a moment to address the personal situation of the customer: "I wish you a lot of fun with your new roommate and have a nice day". The business-like telephone call was ended with "Have a nice day". Showing interest in the specific situation of the customer by paying attention to and showing understanding in the background to the question can be seen as a form of customised personalisation (Surprenant & Solomon, 1987).

### Measures.

In this study we used the same instruments as the measures described in Study 1.

## VIII. Results

**Call evaluation.** Customers who heard the personal call, thought that this call makes a more positive contribution to the experience with the service provider than customers who heard the business-like call ( $M_{\text{PERSONAL}} = 3.19$ ,  $SD = .76$ ;  $M_{\text{BUSINESS}} = 2.85$ ,  $SD = .73$ ;  $t(131) = 2.67$ ,  $p < .01$ ).

**Consumption emotions.** We subsequently looked at the effect of the manipulation (business-like telephone call, personal phone call, no phone call) on consumption emotions. This was done by performing a one-way ANOVA with the manipulation as the independent variable and the consumption emotions as the dependent variables. The analysis showed that there are no significant differences in emotional experience between customers who heard the personal telephone call, customers who heard the business-like telephone call, and customers who did not hear a telephone call ( $F < 1$ ).

**Customer satisfaction and recommendation intention.** We then analysed the impact of the manipulation (business-like call, personal call, no call) on customer satisfaction and recommendation intention. If we performed a one-way ANOVA with the manipulation as the independent variable and customer satisfaction and recommendation intention as the dependent variables, it became clear that customers who heard the personal call are no more satisfied with the organisation than customers who heard the business-like call or customers who did not hear any call ( $F < 1$ ). A one-way ANOVA also shows that customers who heard the personal call are no more willing to recommend the organisation than customers who heard the business-like call or customers who heard no call ( $F < 1$ ).

**Influence of manipulation on relational models.** If we performed a one-way ANOVA and compared the presence of relational models in the minds of customers who heard a personal or a business-like telephone call with the presence of relational models in the minds of customers who did not hear a telephone call, we can conclude that neither the personal call nor the business-like call affected the presence of the relational models

CS ( $F < 1$ ) and MP ( $F < 1$ ).

In the second study we only found partial support for hypothesis 1. The personal call was evaluated positively but did not lead to a better emotional experience, a higher customer satisfaction, or a higher recommendation intention (as was the case with the personal letter in Study 1). No evidence was found in this study for hypothesis 2. The nature of the telephone call (personal or business-like) did not lead to a more negative customer experience and showed no effect on the relational models. As neither the business-like nor the personal phone call led to a strengthening of CS and MP norms, respectively, we can also conclude that there seems to be no violation of relationship norms (taboo trade-off) in this study.

## **IX. Discussion**

In this paper we examined the influence of a personal approach in customer communication on customer experience and customer relationships. In the first study we examined the effects of a form of outcome personalisation, in the second study we examined the effects of customised personalisation. The results of the first study show that a personal letter has a more positive impact on customer experience than a business-like letter (in terms of letter evaluation, consumption emotions, customer satisfaction and recommendation intention). The results also show that a business-like letter does not lead to more negative emotions, but it does lead to less positive emotions than the personal letter. Previous research (authors, 2019) already showed that most people use MP relationship norms in their relationships with large service providers. A business-like letter fits well with this relationship norm and with customers' expectations. A personal letter apparently exceeds expectations, leading to more positive feelings. Despite the fact that the personal letter is actually perceived as more personal by customers, it may also be that other aspects of the letter played a role in the evaluation. The personal letter is not only more personal but also more concise, perhaps more transparent, and is based more on mutual trust. These are probably elements of the service that are being appreciated by both CS and MP customers. This could also be the reason why the personal letter is not perceived as a violation of the MP relational model and why the personal letter has a more positive effect on customer experience than the business-like letter. What also could have played a role is that people do not like to be confronted with the financial consequences of a transaction. The business-like letter specified exactly how the monthly payment was made up.

The results of the second study show that customers think that a personal telephone call leaves a more positive impression on customer experience than a business-like telephone call (in terms of the call evaluation). However, the personal telephone call did not show a more positive effect on consumption emotions, customer satisfaction, and recommendation intention than the business-like telephone call. The fact that the personal and business-like calls did not lead to significant differences is in itself remarkable. In the personal telephone call more attention was paid to the customer by addressing his personal situation. Previous research (Surprenant & Solomon, 1987) showed that customised personalisation was found to have a positive impact on the customer experience. Also, research from De Ruyter and Wetzels (2000) showed that attention is a direct influencer of the evaluation of the service. In our study the extra attention in the personal call should have led to a better experience than the lack of attention in the business-like telephone call. There may be various reasons to explain why this did not happen. One possible explanation could be that the customer has not experienced the extra attention as customised personalisation. Maybe the customer sees the extra attention as a form of small talk that is not sincere. This could also be the reason why the emotional impact is lower than if it is perceived as real attention. Another explanation could be that the reading of a letter (Study 1) is cognitively more burdensome than listening to a telephone call (Study 2). When listening to a telephone conversation it is easy for your thought to wander off. A third explanation could be found in the relational norms that are applied by customers. Previous research (author, 2017) showed that most customers prefer a business-like, distant relationship and also apply the relationship norms that are appropriate for such a relationship (MP). Both telephone calls apparently fit with people's expectations of an energy company and do not lead to an adjustment of relationship norms. The extra attention in the personal telephone call is perhaps experienced as something special. This extra service does lead to a better impression of customer experience but does not lead to a different evaluation of the relationship.

The results of the first study show that a business-like letter did not lead to a strengthening of MP, as we expected, but, rather, to a weakening of CS norms. That is surprising. A possible explanation could be that if people receive a business-like letter the CS-character of the relationship changes in their eyes, so they do not strengthen MP relationship norms but instead adjust CS relationship norms downward. A personal letter will not lead to a strengthening of the CS relationship model. Apparently, both the business-like and the personal letter fit with the expectations that people have about the relationship in an MP or CS model. The telephone call in the second study did not lead to significant changes in relational models

In the introduction to this paper we recognised that a personal letter or a personal telephone call could be experienced as being too personal, and a business-like letter or a business-like telephone call as too

commercial. In that case the nature of the letter or the call could be perceived by customers as a violation of the relationship norms associated with the MP and CS relational models, respectively, that is, a taboo trade-off (Fiske & Tetlock, 1997/2015). Taboo trade-offs are clearly not visible in the studies we conducted. The personal letter or the personal telephone call was clearly not seen as a violation of norms by customers who predominantly use MP. A business-like letter or business-like telephone call was not seen as a violation of CS norms by customers who use CS as their predominant model. This means that from the two studies we can conclude that both the personal and business-like approach fit within the existing CS and MP relationship norms.

Previous research showed that it is possible to activate relationship norms by confronting people with certain scenarios, words, and/or images (e.g., Aggarwal, 2004; McGraw & Tetlock, 2005; Tuk, Verlegh, Smidts, & Wigboldus, 2009). One of the possible explanations as to why it was possible to activate relationship norms in these studies, and why the manipulations in our study hardly show any effect on relational models, may be that these previous studies made use of fictional relationships. Our studies were conducted with existing customers, some of whom already had a relationship with the organisation for years, and whose relationship norms were firmly embedded in their mind. Apparently the relational models form a fairly constant factor in the mind of the customer and these will not change as a result of a single transaction or customer contact. It should also be noted that in neither of the studies were the customers confronted with a negative message. It could be that if a customer is given a negative message, the impact of the intervention is stronger and that customers might well adjust relationship norms. This should be further investigated. As one-time interventions hardly show any effect on relationship norms, the question is whether this effect will be seen if an organisation carries out multiple interventions in succession.

#### **X. Limitations and directions for future research**

One of the limitations of this research was that we initially used ten different statements to measure two relational models. The statements were derived from the confirmatory factor analysis by Haslam and Fiske (1999). The score for a certain model was calculated by taking the average of the statements that belonged to that specific model. We translated the statements into Dutch and adjusted them to a customer–supplier environment. Because of the adjustments, we also performed a confirmatory factor analysis. The number of CS statements remained the same. The number of MP statements was reduced from five to four. In both studies described in this paper, the four MP statements had to be reduced to a single item, because the internal consistency of the MP scale was too low. The reliability of the CS statements was more than acceptable in all the studies. An explanation for the fact that the CS scale was reliable enough throughout all the studies and the MP scale showed insufficient coherence could not be given. The consequence was that, when we measured the effect of interventions in customer service, we measured the effect on the average of five different norms or the effect on only one relationship norm. Neither is ideal: if we measure the effect on the average of five different relationship norms, we cannot see the changes in the scores for individual norms. If we measure the effect on only one relationship norm, it could be that that relationship norm is not (fully) representative of the whole relational model. Future research should therefore focus on developing a solid and more reliable scale for measuring the presence of relational models in customer relationships.

A second limitation of this research is that we only measured the effect of a single intervention. The results, especially the influence of a personal approach on relational models, could be different if we would have measured the effects during a longer period of time in which customers would be confronted with a number of personalised interventions. This requires a longitudinal study.

Finally, a third limitation is the average age of the participants in both studies. Although the participants form a representative sample of the customer database of the energy company, the average age of the participants was relatively high. It could be that a younger population will react differently on the manipulations of the two studies.

#### **XI. Theoretical Contribution**

The most important contribution of this paper to the scientific literature is that it provides a deeper insight into the effects of a personal approach on customer experience and customer relationships. It also provides insight into the applicability of relational models in existing customer–supplier relationships. Previous research (authors, 2019) showed that relational models have a significant influence on customer experience. The research described in this paper shows that a personal approach has a positive effect on customer experience, but doesn't affect relationship norms, at least as long as the personalisation stays within the relationship norms and as long as there is no mention of a taboo trade off. In this research, outcome personalisation shows a stronger effect on customer experience than customised personalisation.



## **XII. Practical Implications**

Besides the scientific contributions, this paper also has valuable practical contributions for service organisations. At this moment one of the major developments in customer-supplier relationships is digital transformation. Given the fact that digitisation cannot be stopped, and given the fact that a lot of customers have the feeling that through digitisation the relationship between organisations and customers become more distant and unpersonal, the challenge for companies is to find ways to make their customer approach more personal. Although digital service environments, with the help of data, can offer a more personal approach, digitisation makes authentic personal contact difficult. Complex questions that require a dialogue can be hard to answer using automated or scripted interfaces. In those cases a customer wants to have personal contact with the organization and also expects organizational involvement in solving their problem. The research described in this paper shows that a personal approach stimulates a positive customer experience, regardless of the relational model that is being used by the customer. If an organisation wants to develop a personal relationship that goes beyond a single personal contact, it has to activate CS relationship norms. Probably the best moment to do this is at the start of the relationship, as it will be difficult to influence relationship norms by single transactions or by single customer contacts once the relationship is established.

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Table 1  
Means and Standard Deviations for Different Letters and Consumption Emotions

	Personal letter		Business-like letter		No letter		F(2, 222) =	p
	M	SD	M	SD	M	SD		
Frustrated	1.93	1.05	2.04	.98	2.19	.99	1.36	.26
Contented	3.75 <sup>1</sup>	.87	3.14 <sup>1,2</sup>	.91	3.53 <sup>2</sup>	.81	7.68	.00
Optimistic	3.26 <sup>1</sup>	.90	2.67 <sup>12</sup>	.95	3.15 <sup>2</sup>	.78	8.31	.00
Encouraged	3.26 <sup>1</sup>	.99	2.49 <sup>12</sup>	.87	3.04 <sup>2</sup>	.81	12.08	.00
Happy	3.07 <sup>1</sup>	.96	2.42 <sup>12</sup>	.89	2.80 <sup>2</sup>	.77	8.39	.00
Irritated	1.98	1.16	2.32	1.07	2.28	.91	1.99	.14
Fulfilled	3.68 <sup>12</sup>	.83	3.26 <sup>1</sup>	.92	3.40 <sup>2</sup>	.90	3.44	.03
Hopeful	3.16 <sup>12</sup>	.98	2.33 <sup>13</sup>	.87	2.86 <sup>23</sup>	.85	12.78	.00
Unfulfilled	2.16	1.08	2.23	.91	2.27	.85	.28	.76
Discontented	2.02	1.09	2.18	.95	2.25	.96	1.06	.35

Note. Means with the same superscripts differ significantly in the row