

# MYSTERY E-MAIL/WEBSITE CUSTOMER SERVICE. A CASE STUDY OF RETAIL COMPANIES

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**Abstract:** *This paper examines the customer service process in 5 retail companies using the method of mystery e-mail/website visits. The following study question was formulated in this article: Does the communication effectuated by the retail sector via e-mail and the content of their websites, fulfill customer expectations? The study was conducted in 60 car dealer centers of Škoda in Poland and the Czech Republic. The adjustment of the standards of customer service in such showrooms constitutes a vital issue in the ambit of a company's functioning, both in the Polish and Czech markets. Perfecting customer service standards by applying communication through the Internet (e.g. the use of e-mails and company websites) for the entrepreneurs functioning in the contemporary market, constitutes a promise of adaptations of standards aimed at meeting customer expectations. It reflects the ability and proclivity to become involved even in extra-economic activities, which, in the long run, might contribute to better economic effects of companies.*

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**JEL Classification:** *D81, D83, M31, O14.*

## Introduction

It is generally assumed that the method of **Mystery Shopping** was created in the US in the 1940s. Although nowadays it is considered to be a method of evaluating the quality of customer service, originally it came into being as a tool to fight fraud. The idea was simple - company owners, in particular, shop owners, used the services of hired auditors in order to effectuate control over their co-workers and employees and in doing so, they could contribute to reducing in-shop shrinkage caused by pilfering. Currently, a **mystery customer** is a trained professional, whose work consists of acting as a double agent. That is to say, from the point of view of an employee of an inspected company, a 'mystery shopper' is seen as an end-user (customer). However, their primary task is to evaluate the quality of customer service and to report the results of their investigation to subjects who commissioned the query (Vodák, 2008). Mystery shopping techniques may include: mystery observation, mystery visits, mystery telephone calls, mystery e-mail or fax, mystery e-mail/website visits.

## 1 Statement of the problem

As result of the observations of the market situation, and spinning from referential research, the following study premises were singled out:

- Due to market competition, company's management constantly seeks solutions, which might provide them with arguments in their efforts to keep their current customers and to attract new ones. It is important particularly in communication via the Internet,

because nowadays this type of communication constitutes the source of initial contact between a customer and a retailer.

- In any service sector that involves direct contact of a customer with a sales assistant, the level of customer satisfaction and their impressions should be constantly checked. Customer service standards become of vital importance as do, in particular, the standards related to the communication process realized via the Internet.
- The technological boom, especially the developments in the realm of telecommunications, provides big opportunities for enterprises to communicate and cooperate with their customers (Kozel, 2012). A specific example of such opportunities is e-mail communication, as well as providing customers with information by service businesses via management of their own websites (Hub, 2016).

## 2 Purpose of the study and research hypotheses

Within the context of the above exposed reasoning, the following research question was formulated: Does the communication effectuated by the retail sector via e-mail, as well as the content of websites, fulfill customer expectations? The following research hypotheses were formulated for the study question:

**RH 1:** The most important factor of customer satisfaction is the complexity of a reply they get to an inquiry submitted using a website contact form website of a given service provider (service company).

**RH2:** Employees of service companies underestimate the impact of communication through online forms and disregard this form of contact with the customer.

**RH3:** The information available on company websites and the customer service provided via the sites meets the customer expectations.

Finally, the scientific objective of the present work is to show the methodology of investigating the customer service process in retail companies using the method of **mystery e-mail/website visits** and the exemplification of such a model in a case study of Skoda centers in Poland and the Czech Republic, and the comparison of the obtained results. The study was conducted altogether in 60 dealer centers in the period from June to October 2014. The study was conducted in all districts, based on a sample of two dealer centers in each district, according to three scenarios. The following specific study targets were established for the defined research hypotheses:

- a) theoretical: the review and the systematization of international scholarship in the realm of communication process, services, quality of service, mystery shopping method, and in particular, mystery e-mail/website visits which remain in direct relation to the identified problem of the study,
  - identification of the factors affecting customer (dis)satisfaction with the service in service companies.
- b) utilitarian/ practical: providing practitioners (mainly decision-makers, entrepreneurs) with information and detailed guidelines in the realm of customer expectations in terms of the quality of customer service,
  - formulation of the conditions for upgrading the customer service standards in order to meet the expectations and needs of customers using modern forms of contact and cooperation with a company.

### 3 Review of the literature

The quality of customer service standards has a decisive impact on the company's market strength. It is therefore a key factor for achieving a competitive advantage in the market (Bondareva, 2015). From a company's point of view, the assessment of customer service standards concerns both external and internal factors. Internal factors comprise the need of efficient employee management, elaborating or verifying internal standards of customer service and the company's image in the market. Among external factors (Sucháček, 2012), it is possible to enumerate signals from customers and the employees' reaction to them, as well as competitor benchmark. The phases of the customer service process via the Internet include the following:

- Greeting – the form of greeting is the overall customer's impression of the company's website (aesthetics, legibility, content, customer service approach, etc.).
- Interaction – sending a request by means of a contact form (content, polite expressions, legibility of information, etc.).
- Feedback – response to questions (customer service standards, i.e. response time, content, scope of response, polite expressions, etc.).
- Invitation for co-operation (invitation to pay a visit at the company's headquarters, establishing a dialogue, keeping in touch by means of the CRM - Customer Relationship Management System, etc.).

The standards of the computer-mediated communication (Hawrysz, 2014a, 2014b) with the customer are very important (Madu, 2002). Inappropriate standards can lead to the loss of customers. Monitoring Internet activity indicators is not a sufficient tool to assess customer service standards. One of the methods aimed at verifying the degree in which customer service standards are met is the **Mystery shopping** method (MS). The authors of this paper will focus on the **mystery e-mail website visits** method. MS is used to assess the quality of products, but works best in services, especially in the sections related to frontline employees that work directly with the potential client. A properly conducted quality assessment program should be a part of the human resource management policy, and the results should serve not only to assess, but =mainly to improve the quality. It is closely linked with the elements of human resources management policies (Školudová, 2016) such as the creation of positive motivation, building a team spirit, identifying the needs and creating training plans, or creating feedback loops between the effects of work and the rewards.

The method begins with determining measurable, achievable objectives in terms of the quality and level of services offered by the company. The formation of measurable standards for services is particularly important due to their characteristics, such as intangibility, heterogeneity, destructibility, or inseparability. The method depending on the needs of a particular company can be used to create measurable standards of service, measure customer satisfaction with quality of service, or improve service quality. The most common sub-targets feature the next stages in the development of a quality improvement system. The MS program is most often used to highlight the importance of the customer and frontline employee interaction in the system of measurements, to identify the training needs, and above all, to determine the objective measures allowing one to measure quality in terms of the human factor.

A perfectly designed and carried out MS has many advantages (Staňková, 2007) that distinguish it from the majority of other quality testing methods. It facilitates the verification process of customer complaints, it can be used to improve the pursued strategies and sales practices, and allows for initial identification of the deterioration risk. The strongest part of this particular method is the ability to disable or at least significantly reduce consumer participation in the study process. The results are more objective. The MS program effectively measures the quality of service provider and customer relations, in which many service elements are difficult to define. The main aim of the program is a review of the staff in terms of pre-defined standards of customer service. Employees obtain an objective picture of their activities perceived by the customers, and the test result is the standard of quality that can be further improved.

The study conducted by means of the mystery e-mail/website visits method is based on the observation of a website's content, communication and assessment of the Mystery Client's relations with a given company's employee by means of a contact form. This kind of research is based on the observation of the communication staff, i.e. the so-called first line in natural conditions by a qualified auditor (the so-called mystery shopper). This method combines the assessment of quantitative and qualitative study characteristics.

The mystery e-mail/website visits study can be described by means of the following features (Maison, 2007): hidden – the employee does not know that they are dealing with a mystery client (auditor); controlled – the auditor acts on the basis of a specific scenario which is to draw attention to specific service elements; standardized – a mystery client draws attention to specific aspects related to the website service, which they annotate on an elaborated study form in accordance with a specific analysis scenario.

#### **4 Methodology**

The following research methods and tools were applied to carry out the article: critical analysis of national (Řezanková, 2011) and foreign publications (Jackson, 2012) in subject literature, construction of a survey questionnaire, survey studies conducted by applying the random purposive method, determining the average values of standard deviations, levels of trust, correlation, regression test, chi-square test, the use of layer graphs for analyzing and developing a model of the profile of factors affecting the quality of customer service (Wasilewska, 2011). All statistical calculations / analyses were conducted using the SPSS program.

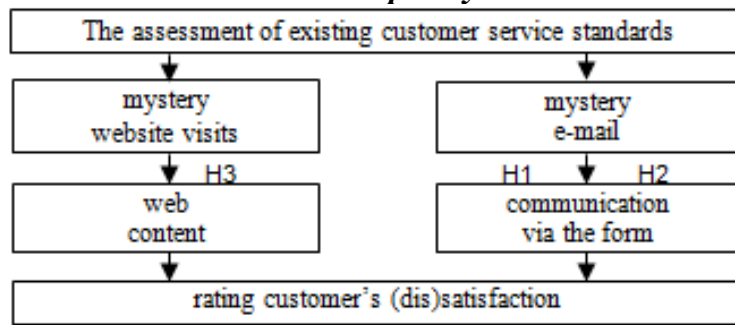
The nature of the analyzed data is ordinal. Ordinal data may be logically sorted and each pair of values clearly shows which of its value is higher and which is lower. Therefore they may be analyzed either by the use of metrics used for the nominal data analysis or by the scale analysis. That is why both the Pearson Chi-square test and correlation coefficient have been used for the analysis of mutual relationships. In the case of correlation coefficient the Spearman's correlation coefficient was chosen, as it is more applicable for ordinal data than Person's correlation coefficient.

The study was conducted in 60 Škoda dealer centers dealer centers in the period from June to October 2014, in Poland and the Czech Republic. The study covered the entire territory of the respective countries: in Poland, the study was carried out in all 16 voivodships and in the Czech Republic – in all 14 provinces. The study was conducted in each province based on two dealer centers according to three pre-defined performance scenarios. A: the purchase of a new environmentally-friendly urban car (Fabia), B: the

purchase of a new family car (Octavia, Rapid), C: the purchase of a new big car (Superb) in the settlement of an old medium-sized car.

As result of the 180 responses were obtained. The defined issue of the study has been specified in the form of a research model, i.e. the so-called universal assessment model of the customer service quality (Fig. 1). Assessment was performed on the scale from +2 – very positive evaluation to -2 – very negative evaluation for each characteristics / factors (Walker, 2013).

**Fig. 1: The research model – a universal model for assessing the standard of customer service quality**



*Source: own study*

The scenario was realized as follows. The auditor (a mystery customer) got in touch with the customer service department of a given car dealer center by means of a contact form sent from different e-mail addresses. He or she sent three different questions concerning the above mentioned situation to each of the dealer centers. According to the adopted scenario, the mystery client, was to simulate the lack of knowledge about the dealer’s offer. Furthermore, he or she was to express the intention to buy a car (the three target models: new environmentally-friendly urban car (Fabia), new family car (Octavia, Rapid) or new big car (Superb)) in the settlement of an old medium-sized car) and solicit assistance in finding an appropriate car via e-mail. According to the scenario and the assessment form, the auditor established a dialogue, made an appraisal and assessed the website content of the indicated car dealer centers.

## 5 Data analysis

Exemplary customer service standards have been elaborated on the basis of the referential study. They will form the premise for subsequent analyses and conclusions of the study. The main goals and assumptions used as the basis for the formulation of exemplary customer service standards in dealer centers focused on the following factors: the guarantee of the expected customer service quality, elaboration of a positive image of a dealer center, unification of customer service and increase in customer satisfaction. As result, the following detailed and general standards have been elaborated:

- The attractiveness of the website affecting the dealer’s image. It is crucial to ensure the attractiveness of a website in a scope that is visible to the customer. An aesthetic appearance, the website content and its intuitive use are the key parameters at stake here. In this scope of standard, it is vital to ensure that a visit to the dealer’s website makes a positive impression on a customer.
- Active interest in the customer. The standards recommend that the front-line employee, during the e-mail contact, should remain attentive and responsive, giving the impression of constant interest in the customer. The customer requires a professional dialogue

in the scope of polite expressions used, and the factual and substantial content of the response. It is also important to ask detailed questions that tell the customer that he or she is not ignored by the employees. During the dialogue, the employee provides information making the customer feel safe. These messages concern the time necessary for a professional preparation of a response, the current status of the case and the date of its resolution.

- Customer service. In the first stage of the service, an employee should identify the customer’s needs. It is important to be able to ask appropriate questions in order to identify the actual needs of the customer. Thanks to a scrupulous dialogue, it is possible to read the customer’s needs and, at the same time, avoid misunderstandings or mistakes. Moreover, thanks to additional questions, the customer’s self-esteem increases and the customer feels that he or she is treated individually. In the second part of the service process, the employee has to explain the issue with which the customer came and to confirm that he or she understands the inquiry correctly. Active communication strengthens the image of the employee’s engagement in problem-solving and it makes the customer believe that he or she is treated seriously. The employee ought to co-operate with the customer, providing him or her with a reliable and complex response to the questions, so that he or she understands the meaning of the response. It is also important for the employee to use polite expressions (Madam/Sir, Please/Thank you, etc.).
- Saying goodbye to the customer. This is also an important element in the case of e-mail communication. A correct leave-taking is performed in accordance with the CSR standard, which means that stable relations between the service provider and the service user are created. The customer’s opinion, which will be passed to other people, concerning their satisfaction or dissatisfaction with the customer service is very important (Matzler, 2005).

## 6 Results

The first part of the study concerned the evaluation of the structure and content of Škoda’s website. Based on a prior referential study, the authors identified several key factors that affect the way a customer perceives a given website. The most important aspects affecting the customer’s assessment of a website were singled out: aesthetic appearance, colorfulness, uniqueness, legibility and attractiveness. The evaluations regarding the structure and content of Škoda’s dealer websites in Poland and the Czech Republic differed. In Poland, a decidedly greater importance was ascribed to the appearance of the website than in the case of the Czech Republic, and it was in fact difficult to point to one of the constituent factors that had the decisive impact on the evaluation. In the Czech Republic on the other hand, the paramount aspect of the evaluation was the legibility of the site, i.e. its conciseness, accuracy, intuitiveness (being user-friendly) and transparency. The detailed results are presented in Tab. 1.

**Tab. 1: Features of websites in Poland and the Czech Republic, respectively**

Country	aesthetic	colorful	unique	legibility	attractive
Poland	1.73	2.00	2.00	2.00	2.00
Czech Republic	0.82	0.81	0.70	1.22	0.63

*Source: own elaboration on the basis of survey results*

The evaluation of an Internet site also differed depending on the situation considered, i.e. with respect to the product under consideration. For customers expressing interest

in a new economic urban car (hatchback, Fabia) the most important was the site's legibility, but also its uniqueness, and the least important was the aesthetic appearance. Customers expressing interest in a new family car (sedan, Octavia, Rapid) constituted the most demanding group. They attached a far greater importance to all the above specified features of a website, in comparison to other respondents. The most crucial element in creating a website was for them the fact of it being perspicuous and colorful. Customers interested in a new large car (also a sedan, Superb) attributed the least importance to the appearance of the website (Tab. 2).

**Tab. 2: Breakdown of the Internet website features depending on the product**

Product	aesthetic	colorful	unique	legibility	attractive
Fabia	1.38	1.53	1.55	1.77	1.47
Octavia, Rapid	1.52	1.60	1.57	1.82	1.52
Superb	0.93	1.08	0.93	1.25	0.97

*Source: own elaboration on the basis of survey results*

The chi-square test analysis revealed a statistically relevant relation between the features of a website and the country in which the evaluation was performed. All the aforementioned features were deemed pertinent in Poland. The chi-square analysis also showed a statistically significant relation between the majority of the website features (apart from the feature of aesthetic appearance) and the type of product (Tab. 3).

**Tab. 3: A dealer website concerning external aspects**

Pearson Chi-Square	Value	Country df	Sig.	Value	Product df	Sig.
aesthetic	43.937	4	<b>0.000</b>	13.383	8	0.099
colorful	92.269	4	<b>0.000</b>	15.862	8	<b>0.044</b>
unique	96.923	4	<b>0.000</b>	26.064	8	<b>0.001</b>
legibility	61.791	4	<b>0.000</b>	18.712	8	<b>0.016</b>
attractive	90.000	4	<b>0.000</b>	22.911	8	<b>0.003</b>

*Source: own elaboration on the basis of survey results*

In order to analyze the dependencies between particular features we used Spearman's correlation coefficient. For all the analyzed dependencies the coefficient had positive values, which signified a positive correlation. Since in most of the cases the coefficient exceeds the value of 0.7, it signifies a strong correlation. A particularly strong relation existed in the case of evaluations, such as uniqueness, attractiveness and colorfulness. It implied that people for whom the website's uniqueness was significant also valued its attractiveness. People, that paid attention to the site's colorfulness, also valued its attractiveness (Tab. 4).

**Tab. 4: Spearman's rho correlations - external aspects**

	aesthetic	colorful	unique	legibility
aesthetic	1.000			
colorful	0.775	1.000		
unique	0.746	<b>0.926</b>	1.000	
legibility	0.685	0.773	0.826	1.000
attractive	0.787	0.933	0.951	0.846

*Source: own elaboration on the basis of survey results*

Due to the limited scope of this article, all other main outcomes of the external aspects' section that have been calculated in a similar manner are shown in a shortened version in the following table.

**Tab. 5: Tests results (other external aspects)**

	Chi-Square test (dependency)		Strongest Correlation
	Country	Situation	(couple)
website structure	4 out of 4 cases	4 out of 4 cases	intuitive - quick
content of website	5 out of 5 cases	4 out of 5 cases	orderliness - complex
availability of the website options	5 out of 5 cases	3 out of 5 cases	available - efficient

*Source: own elaboration on the basis of survey results*

The latter part of the survey concerned the contact form available on the website. The first element assessed was the time of receiving a response to a given inquiry. 41% of people received a response the same day and 27% of them were answered the next day. Experts claim that the most important aspect from the point of view of customer's satisfaction is receiving a response as fast as possible and the waiting time should not exceed 48 hours. The analysis by means of the chi-square test shows a statistically significant relation between the time of receiving a response and the country in which the assessment took place. This analysis also shows another statistically significant relation between the time of receiving a response and the product type (Tab. 6).

**Tab. 6: Pearson Chi-Square - results of response time**

Pearson Chi-Square	Country			Situation		
	Value	df	Sig.	Value	df	Sig.
time	31.026	6	<b>0.000</b>	23.075	12	<b>0.027</b>

*Source: own elaboration on the basis of survey results*

A response to an inquiry was obtained relatively faster in Poland, i.e. over 54% of the auditors received it on the same day (27% in the Czech Republic). Over 12% (41% in the Czech Republic) received a response on the following day. Those interested in buying a family car got a response to their inquiry in the shortest time. 58% got a response to their inquiry on the same day.

The following elements of the responses were analyzed: a well-defined subject of the answer (subject), selected option "confirm" (auto-response), using expressions such as "Hello", "Good morning", "Dear Sir/Madam" (manner of addressing the customer), compliance of the message's content with the inquiry (context), using complimentary clauses, writing "Mr./Mrs. ...", "Sir/Madam" (or other personal forms) in capital letters, appropriate language, spelling correctness, general correctness, contact data (address), name and surname of the responsible employee (personal details) and using emoticons. 88% of the responses had a clearly defined subject. A response most often began with the words "Dear Sir/Madam" in Poland, whereas it began with "Hello" in the Czech Republic (Tab. 7).



**Tab. 7: Elements of the reply to an inquiry**

Pearson Chi-Square	Value	Country df	Sig.	Value	Situation df	Sig.	Value	Time df	Sig.
subject	9.524	1	<b>0.002</b>	19.167	2	<b>0.000</b>	0.302	1	0.582
auto-response	8.436	1	<b>0.004</b>	26.504	2	<b>0.000</b>	0.676	1	0.411
manner of addressing the customer	59.643	3	<b>0.000</b>	8.010	6	0.237	18.869	3	<b>0.000</b>
context	0.451	1	0.502	1.253	2	0.535	0.027	1	0.869
complimentary clause	11.531	1	<b>0.001</b>	20.791	2	<b>0.000</b>	15.001	1	<b>0.000</b>
personal forms	2.689	1	0.101	2.195	2	0.334	3.498	1	0.061
language correctness	0.883	1	0.347	2.059	2	0.357	1.149	1	0.284
general correctness	13.642	1	<b>0.000</b>	0.451	2	0.798	1.816	1	0.178
contact address	5.501	1	<b>0.019</b>	4.945	2	0.084	7.157	1	<b>0.007</b>
personal details	0.883	1	0.347	2.279	2	0.320	1.149	1	0.284
emoticons	2.315	1	0.128	1.016	2	0.602	2.315	1	0.128

Source: own elaboration on the basis of survey results

The following categories of evaluating the ways of responding were analyzed: comprehensive, content developing, communicative, limited, understandable and professional. The response comprehensibility and its communicativeness were the most important aspects both in Poland and in the Czech Republic (Tab. 8).

**Tab. 8: Pearson Chi-Square - constituent parts of a reply to an inquiry**

Pearson Chi-Square	Value	Country df	Sig.	Value	Situation df	Sig.	Value	Time df	Sig.
exhaustive	14.154	4	<b>0.007</b>	33.338	8	<b>0.000</b>	7.975	4	0.092
developing contents	33.602	4	<b>0.000</b>	16.483	8	<b>0.036</b>	15.984	4	<b>0.003</b>
communicable	30.745	2	<b>0.000</b>	12.502	4	<b>0.014</b>	4.649	2	0.098
casual	25.142	4	<b>0.000</b>	21.745	8	<b>0.005</b>	14.257	4	<b>0.007</b>
comprehensible	32.573	2	<b>0.000</b>	6.176	4	0.186	0.618	2	0.734
professional	18.146	4	<b>0.001</b>	24.249	8	<b>0.002</b>	10.597	4	<b>0.031</b>

Source: own elaboration on the basis of survey results

Those interested in particular products differed from each other in their assessment of the way of responding to an inquiry. For those willing to buy an environmentally-friendly car the response's comprehensibility was most important, while for people willing to buy a family car the most important aspect of the response was its communicativeness. The response's comprehensibility and communicativeness were also very important from the point of view of the response time. A quite strong correlation takes place in the case of a comprehensive and content developing response, comprehensive and professional response, content developing and professional response, communicative and understandable response as well as communicative and professional response.

Another group of the analyzed features of an e-mail response included: presenting alternative offers, accuracy of information, escalating an inquiry and asking for personal contact. In term of customer satisfaction, asking for personal contact was the most important of the analyzed features. The second most important category was the accuracy of the response. The chi-square test analysis does not show any statistically significant relations between the analyzed features and the country where the assessment was conducted. These relations were not identified among the analyzed groups interested in different products and response time.

The final part of the analysis included summing up the correspondence. In this part, the following elements were taken into account: provision of contact information, gratitude for contact, invitation to cooperation and initiating further contact. In terms of customer

satisfaction, the invitation to a further exchange of correspondence was perceived as the most important, while gratitude for contact was the second most important aspect. From the point of view of groups expressing interest in particular products, no differences were found in the order of the features, but there were differences in the meaning ascribed to particular characteristics. For those willing to buy a family car the invitation to correspondence was the most satisfactory (Tab. 9).

**Tab. 9: Pearson Chi-Square – summary of the correspondence**

Pearson Chi-Square	Value	Country df	Sig.	Value	Situation df	Sig.	Value	Time df	Sig.
contact details	1.812	1	0.178	6.843	2	<b>0.033</b>	6.422	1	<b>0.011</b>
gratitude for contact	9.274	1	<b>0.002</b>	11.658	2	<b>0.003</b>	0.535	1	0.465
invitation to cooperation	1.264	1	0.261	7.384	2	<b>0.025</b>	0.014	1	0.905
invitation to further correspondence	1.110	1	0.292	16.158	2	<b>0.000</b>	4.585	1	<b>0.032</b>

*Source: own elaboration on the basis of survey results*

## 7 Discussion

Among all website features, the website's legibility was considered to be the most important. The ratings of other features depended on the country in which the assessment was conducted. In Poland, all features apart from the aesthetic appearance were considered to be equally important. In the Czech Republic, aesthetics were the second most important feature of the website, which was followed by attractiveness and colorfulness. In the Czech Republic, uniqueness was considered relatively as the least important feature among those included in the analysis. The respondents interested in buying a family car were particularly demanding in terms of assessing the website's features. They emphasized the importance of all of the aforementioned features. Website transparency was considered to be the most important, attractiveness and uniqueness were deemed as secondary. The high expectations of people interested in buying a family car may result from the fact that visiting dealer centers with a child, in particular with a small one, is very cumbersome. This is why parents try to minimize the time spent in dealer center by preparing for the visit as best as possible. Thus they pay a lot of attention to offers included on the dealer's website in order to use the time which they would then spend at the center in an optimal manner. In comparison to other analyzed groups, those interested in buying a big luxurious car seemed to be the least interested in the dealer's website structure and its content. It may be due to the specificity of a particular group of customers for whom social prestige is most important when buying a luxurious vehicle. Their expectations are different and they demand individual interactions and personal contact, which is not provided by the information flow on the website.

Among all website features, the website's arrangement was considered to be the most important. All features of the website were assessed as very important in Poland. In the Czech Republic, complexity was the second most important feature and was followed by intuitiveness and the speed of browsing. The Czechs considered speed of browsing to be relatively the least important of all the analyzed features. The most demanding group that assessed the websites included people willing to buy an environmentally-friendly car. The group paid attention to the importance of all of the aforementioned features. The people interested in buying a family car were also demanding. For this group, the most important website features were as follows: arrangement, complexity, intuitiveness and speed

of browsing. Among all of the analyzed groups, the people interested in buying a big car seemed to be the least interested in the dealer website's structure.

The analysis of the highlighted substantial features demonstrates that appearance and exhaustiveness were the most important. The significance of these features depended on the product in which individual mystery clients were interested. Clients interested in buying a family car were also the most demanding group. In their opinion, the most important substantial features of a website include: clarity, exhaustiveness and appearance. For clients interested in buying an environmentally-friendly car, the most important features included: appearance, exhaustiveness and clarity. Notwithstanding, for clients interested in buying a big car, the significance of the mentioned features was the same as for clients interested in buying a family car. The expectations of clients interested in buying a big car towards a website's substantial features are comparatively the highest. No other group demonstrated as high expectations.

In terms of website options, the availability of an online cost estimate – price calculator for a given car (functional) and the ability of connecting to company social networking sites (compatible website), were considered to be the most important features. The ability of changing the website's language (optional) was the least important for the respondents.

The analysis shows that there are differences in customer service in dealer centers in Poland and in the Czech Republic. Despite the fact that the Poles get a response to an inquiry within a relatively shorter time, most of their inquiries remain unanswered. There are also differences in the level of customer service depending on the product in which the customers are interested. People interested in buying a family car and then those willing to buy a big car were the groups served the fastest. This may derive from the fact that there is a relatively stable demand expressed by this group, which is why it becomes a significant buyer in the market.

The analysis of response elements shows a rather universal set of elements used to give responses to inquiries submitted via e-mail. Such a response included a detailed subject, was related to the inquiry's content and included basic complimentary forms. It was written in a correct manner in terms of grammar and spelling. The only difference concerned the manner of addressing the sender. In Poland, the messages were mostly addressed with "Dear Sir/Madam", whereas in the Czech Republic – with a "Hello".

## **Conclusion**

The standards of a company's customer service are of key importance. The management staff should design and define details in the realm of the customer service standards. After their implementation, managers should monitor the effects of their implementation and improve them if necessary. The scientific objective of the present work was to show the methodology of investigating the customer service process in retail companies using the method of **mystery e-mail/website visits**, exemplifying such a model in a case study of Škoda dealer centers in Poland and the Czech Republic, and comparing the obtained results.

This objective has been achieved. In terms of the utilitarian goals, the following recommendations for the managers have been formulated in terms of the customer service standards (recommendations formulated for particular aspects):

#### A. External aspects of a website:

- Appearance - general impression. The website should have an aesthetic appearance, be clear, i.e. the content should be concise, accurate and the arrangement - transparent.
- Structure of the website. In this area, the following factors were considered: harmonious arrangement and placement of information (i.e. organization), comprehensive information, user-friendly arrangement of content and the speed of browsing - substantive aspect - the content of the page. The important features considered here included: complexity of information, transparency, exhaustiveness, appearance and ordering.
- Website options. The most important features included: online contact form (available), optional high-speed data search (efficient), optional calculator – online cost estimate (functional), ability to connect to corporate social networks (compatible).

#### B. Contact form handling:

- a key feature is the response time to an inquiry,
- other important features: subject, auto-response, manner of addressing the customer, context, complimentary clause, personal forms of address, appropriate language, correct spelling, general correctness, contact address, personal details, emoticons.

C. Sales/consulting abilities; it was shown, that the employee's manner of responding to an inquiry is crucial and requires the following features: exhaustive responding, developing contents, communicable, casual, comprehensible, professional.

D. Response to questions concerning employee service. The most important features of a response to an inquiry submitted via e-mail were as follows: presentation of alternative offers, accuracy of information, escalating the case to another person and the employee's request for personal contact with the customer.

E. Leave-taking/recapitulation. The most important elements were as follows: placing contact information, gratitude for contact, invitation to cooperation and invitation to further correspondence.

The identification and empirical verification of research hypotheses enabled outlining of the standards of customer service via Internet communication. These standards can be recommended for use, especially to service companies.

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