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**Customer Care in Technology Business  
Conceptual Framework and Empirical Evidence**

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## 1. Introduction

In recent years, industrial suppliers have increasingly shifted their focus from acquisition of new customers to growth opportunities with existing customers. There is a demand for high interaction especially in a technology supplier's customer relationships, because its customers need the supplier's expertise to fully utilise the benefits of complex products and services (Paliwoda & Bonaccorsi 1993). For this reason, the future growth opportunities exist in value-added products and services, including extensions, consumables, maintenance services, expertise programs, software upgrading, etc.

However, this transformation from a product supplier to a service provider is a major challenge for a technology supplier, because this may remarkably change its position in the value chain. Furthermore, service-based businesses may require from the supplier new kind of organisational capabilities and resources. Moreover, the customers are often reluctant to pay for the value-added services, because they have used to receive the services "free of charge" as a part of the product price.

Nevertheless, there is little research that would have profoundly discussed this phenomenon. During the last decades, parts of the phenomenon has been discussed under many theoretical concepts: solution selling (e.g. Mattsson 1975), service marketing (e.g. Simon 1992), and value-based customer relationships (e.g. Anderson & Narus 1999). The diversity of concepts has caused difficulties and therefore, a new concept 'customer care' has been defined to capture the focal phenomenon. The purpose of the paper is to build, based on empirical evidence, a conceptual framework for creation of care activities. More specifically, we are interested in *how customer care can strengthen the technology supplier's value position*. The secondary research questions are:

- How should customer care be defined?
- What factors affect creation of care activities?
- How can a technology supplier deliver care activities?

A few underlying assumptions have been made. First, the study focuses on creation of positional advantage through a differentiated position, not the lowest delivery cost position (see Day and Wensley 1988). A differentiated position is created when some value-adding activities are performed in a way that leads to perceived superiority along dimensions that are valued by the customers. For these activities to be profitable, customers must be willing to pay a price premium for the benefits and the premium must exceed the added costs of superior performance.

Second, the study focuses on technology suppliers, as their products usually are important for the customer's business. Therefore, customers should have a potential interest in cooperation with the supplier (see Bensaou 1999). Moreover, the emphasis is on "hub companies", that have built a central network position between their component suppliers and customers.

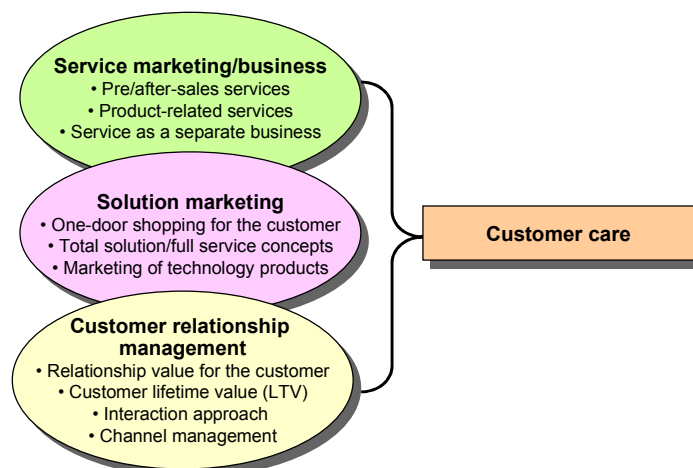
Third, Sawhney and Parikh (2001) state that the most value is created either at the most distant from users, with generic scale-intensive consolidated functions, or at the closest to users, with highly customised connections with customers. This study focuses on suppliers that have chosen the last alternative as their main strategy.

The paper consists of five sections. In Section 2, the theoretical background of customer care is discussed. Section 3 describes the methodology of the empirical part and Section 4 introduces the conceptual framework based on the empirical findings. Theoretical and managerial conclusions will be drawn in Section 5.

## 2. Theoretical background

Three background theories of customer care are described in Figure 1. One of them is *service marketing/business* from the 1980's, including discussion of product-related and after-sales services (e.g. Lele & Karmarkar 1983; Cohen & Lee 1990; Simon 1992; Burger & Cann 1995; Stenberg 1996). The authors suggested that a potential of services as a competitive tool has not been fully exploited, because it is extremely difficult to provide consistent service quality across countries. Moreover, providing application know-how, instructing customers and developing specific software are tasks that require highly qualified employees and are more difficult to imitate than a product.

Figure 1: Theoretical background of customer care



Second, *solution marketing* has also influenced customer care. Discussion of system selling approach started already in the 1970's (e.g. Mattsson 1975) but has continued until these days (e.g. Stremersch et al 2001). According to Kosonen (1990, 17), the system business has three typical characteristics. First of all, the system can be defined as a unique total solution to a customer's needs and problems. Second, it is about selling know-how, often an innovation, which thus requires from the system supplier good consulting skills. Third, the main idea of the system business is the sale of a positive rate of return for the customer's investment (ROI). Recently, Stremersch et al (2001) introduced a concept called "full service" that is about the same as Kosonen's definition for the system business, but it underlines the role of full service contracts in the after-sales markets, not in the selling phase.

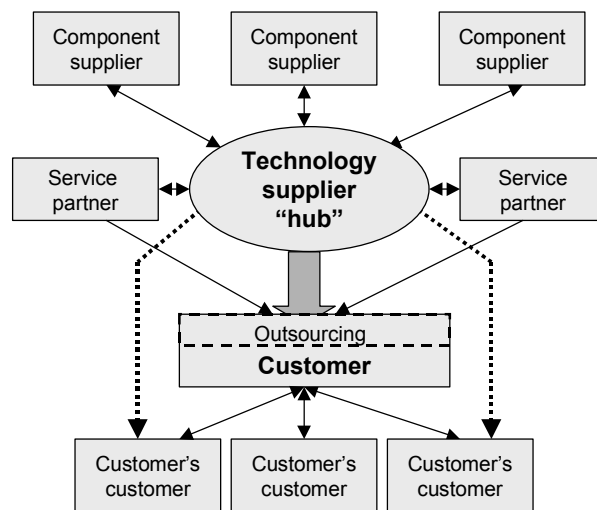
Third main discussion has been *customer relationship management*, especially value-based relationships (e.g. Anderson & Narus 1999) and interaction approach (e.g. Håkansson & Snehota 1995; Möller & Wilson 1995; Ford et al 1998). According to Ford et al (1998, 113), the relationship value for the customer can be formed by the following formula: Relationship benefits (cost benefits + revenue benefits) – Relationship costs (direct procurement costs + relationship handling costs). Another theoretical basis could be three phases of value-based management of Anderson and Narus (1999, 4): Understanding, creating and delivering value.

### **Value position of a technology supplier**

One of the potential goals of customer care could be to generate long-term cash flow with reasonable gross margins. If care activities had a major part of total sales, the cash flow could be more stable than before, because total sales of the technology supplier would not depend only on annual equipment sales.

On the other hand, customer care may also have other than financial influences. Shift forward in the value chain with advanced care activities may strengthen the supplier's position in the value system. With advanced management of third parties and back selling to customers' customers, the technology supplier could gain an orchestration role in the value system. Figure 2 describes dyadic relationship between a technology supplier and its customer in the network context within four levels, including also component suppliers and customers' customers (see Anderson et al 1994). This focal network consists of those actors that are perceived as relevant, and that are within the suppliers' network horizon (Möller and Halinen 1999).

Figure 2: Technology supplier's position in the value system



A starting point in the value chain analysis could be segmenting customers according to their strategy (see Verhallen 1998). If the customer's strategy were to focus on its own customers, it might decide to outsource a part of its technical "back-office" activities to the supplier. Outsourcing would enable customers to obtain higher value, more flexible, and more integrated services than internal sources could offer. Moreover, it would improve the company's capacities to innovate by interacting with "best in the world" knowledge sources (Quinn & Hilmer 1994).

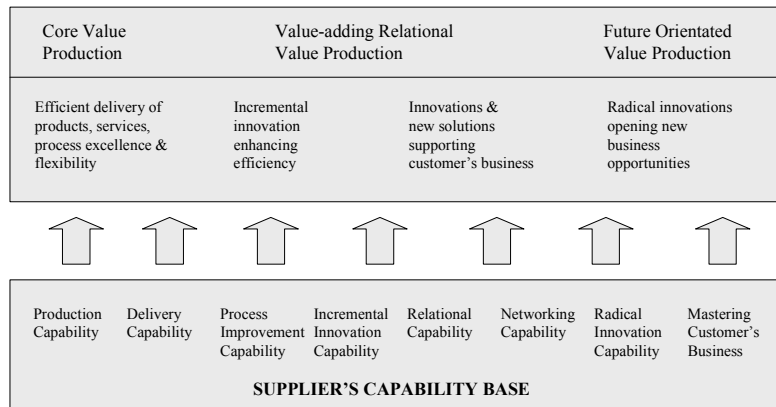
Customers could, in principle, outsource to the supplier the activities that do not offer the basis for competitive advantage, are more efficient to produce externally than internally and can be reliably performed by the supplier (Quinn & Hilmer 1994). On the other hand, the customers are often concerned about losing the skills that they outsource and becoming overly dependent on the supplier (Ford et al 1998, 126).

### Capabilities and resources

The shift from an equipment supplier to a performance provider requires new kind of resources and capabilities, because the organisation shifts from delivering sales and installation projects to offering care activities to the existing customers. But what is the difference between resources and capabilities? *Resources* include physical capital resources, human capital resources, and organisational capital resources (Barney 1991). Derived from resources, *capabilities* consist of skills and accumulated knowledge to enable the activities in a business process to be carried out (Day 1994).

Creation of relationship value is based on the supplier's capabilities. Figure 3 provides a continuum from core value to future orientated value production, with related capability requirements (Möller & Törrönen 2000, 15).

Figure 3: Business supplier's value creation potential



Source: Möller & Törrönen 2000, 15

When the products and services are important for the customer's business, the customer may see the future orientated value production as an essential factor in supplier evaluation. This, on the other hand, would require from a technology supplier the capabilities of mastering the customer's business.

### Value offering and pricing mechanisms

Anderson and Narus (1991) introduced ten ways to augment the product offering for collaborative relationships. However, there is no comprehensive categorisation for care activities. In general, customers often expect that services that have been accompanying a product would be covered by the product's price (Shapiro et al 1987). There are naturally product-related responsibilities, for instance warranties, which have to be provided free of charge. Nevertheless, most of the care activities might offer business opportunities, if they were carefully packaged and would create measurable relationship value for the customer.

Various pricing mechanisms could be potential for customer care. Stremersch et al (2001) argue that full services are offered as annual or continuous contracts and agreements. Naturally, one pricing method could be to have separate prices "on menu fashion" for each product and service. An advanced method is performance contracting (see Buse et al 2001). In this model, the customer does not any longer have to purchase a complex equipment. Instead, the supplier with its network partners makes the equipment available to the customer and provides different services around

the equipment. The customer has to pay only for the performance he gets. Therefore, fixed costs are converted into variable costs. This idea is in accordance to the concept of value-in-use, which means that “the product is the total package of benefits customers receive when they buy it” (Cespedes 1992).

However, process or business consulting may cause difficulties, because customers can be reluctant to pay for consulting concerning their own business, e.g. general business advice and marketing support. A possible explanation is that the supplier is not seen as especially competent in these fields (Simon 1992), particularly when the customers have their own advanced in-house capabilities. For this reason, technology supplier has to either invest remarkably in the essential capabilities or refrain from a consulting role and concentrate on enhancing the value of the product to the customers.

### **Ways of delivering value**

Broad range of care activities might require various capabilities, which would often not be possible or at least effective for one supplier. Therefore, use of third parties as complementary service providers or channel partners may play an increasing role. For a global technology supplier, creation of external alliances may enable to deliver the multiple care activities to a large and geographically dispersed customer base. Customer care may also require an internal organisation structure that encourages sharing ideas between people with complementary capabilities. One alternative is account management approach, including team members with customer specific capabilities (Cespedes 1992).

In addition to management of network partners, another important aspect could be the Internet. Interestingly, the Internet provides a direct channel for suppliers to reach end users, reducing the leverage of intervening companies (Porter 2001).

## **4. Methodology**

The case method was selected as the basic research approach because relatively little a priori information existed about the focal phenomenon. Moreover, to be able to compare the cases and to draw non-industry-related conclusions, a multiple-case study method was chosen. Secondary data have been collected from seven global technology companies from the information and communications technology (ICT)

and engineering industries, including four Finnish-based and three US-based firms. Secondary data sources included company's internal journals/magazines, seminar presentations, www-pages, public journals and annual reports. This enabled to obtain a broad view of the leading practices and topics and increased our general understanding of the focal phenomenon.

Moreover, to be able to build a conceptual framework, direct interviews and an access to company documents were needed. Therefore, totally eight (8) theme interviews were conducted in four case companies during February-March 2002. All eight interviews were tape-recorded. In addition, complementary questions we asked and additional meetings were kept when relevant to guarantee validity of the findings. The interviewed people were senior managers for sales, business development or customer/technical support. An approach was partly explorative, in other words, semi-structured questionnaires were used but they were adjusted between interviews, when new interesting insights were found.

## **5. Customer care in creation of strong value position**

Based on the empirical evidence, the definition for customer care is created and the conceptual framework for creation of care activities has been built. The empirical findings have been reported by following the structure of the conceptual framework.

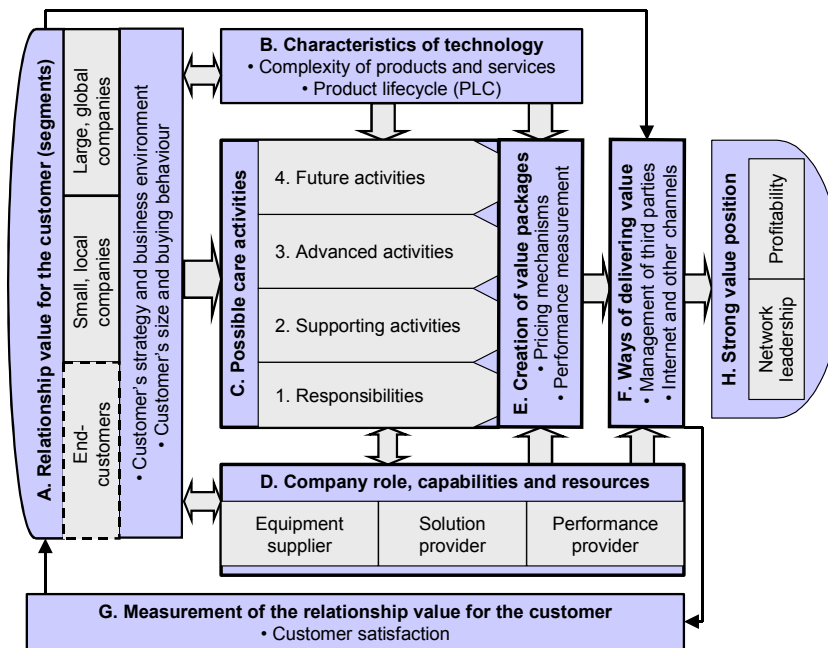
### **Definition and conceptual framework**

All suppliers stated that care activities should be based around their key capabilities. However, there were fundamental differences between technology companies. A part of the interviewees considered customer care as a problem solving or support process with focus on contact centres services. On the other hand, for a few companies, care was a profitable business. One of the case companies, a Finnish technology supplier for process industry, described customer care as a transformation from an equipment supplier to a lifecycle service provider. The company focuses increasingly on taking care of and improving the competitiveness of the customer's business and production processes throughout their life cycles. The supplier underlined the importance of utilising the existing installed base and technical solutions by value creating, innovative commercial applications on it.

Based both on the theoretical discussions and the empirical evidence, our definition for customer care is: *A bundle of activities that enable customers to fully utilise the*

*benefits of technology products.* It starts from cost-effective management of warranty-based responsibilities and continues to creation and coordination of value-added products and services. A conceptual framework of customer care is built in Figure 4. The purpose of the framework is to describe creation of customer care as a continuous process.

Figure 4: Conceptual framework for customer care



Creation of care activities begins from understanding the customers' needs and the characteristics of the technology business. Care activities can be divided into four categories, including responsibilities, supporting activities, advanced activities and future activities. These activities further depend on a company's role, capabilities and resources.

A central phase seems to be the creation of value packages for the customers, based on carefully defined value propositions and capabilities to meet these value specifications. In addition, ways of delivering care activities have to be evaluated, including the use of network partners and the Internet. As a result, care activities enable the technology supplier to obtain a higher share than before of the total value produced in the value system. At the same time, relationship value for the customer is measured to ensure the continuous development of customer care.

## **A. Relationship value for the customer**

All interviewed case companies pointed out that customers expect quick answers to their problems or at least information of the stage of problem resolution. From the supplier, this naturally requires well-defined support processes and capable people for technical support. One of the case companies further divided the customer needs into the following three categories: quick repairs, no failures, and no performance problems. The supplier designed its care activities around these customer needs.

Customers can be divided into three segments: large global companies, small local companies and end-users. Large companies can be handled as direct accounts but care activities to small companies are often delivered via third parties, for instance agents, due to transaction efficiency. This division has major implications for creation of care packages. Moreover, end-users can be mainly reached directly via the Internet.

Understanding of a customer's strategy and business environment has an increasingly important role for many technology suppliers. Moreover, a customer's buying behaviour that partly depends on company's size and strategy has to be taken into account in creation of care activities.

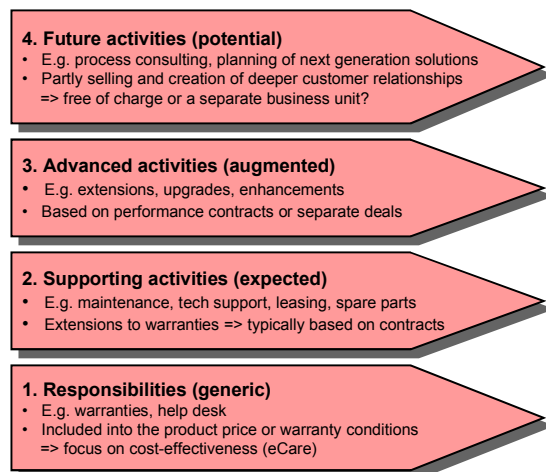
## **B. Characteristics of technology products**

Many care activities tend to have been to a large extent product-related. In very complex and knowledge-intensive businesses, customers may have given the whole technical maintenance of the equipment to their technology suppliers. The trend toward more complex solutions has increased the role of complementary service partners. On the other hand, in standard products with lower unit price, the care was mainly seen as a cost, not as a business. However, innovative and cost-effective software-based solutions combined with the Internet connection seem to offer new business opportunities also for these standard products.

## **C. Possible care activities**

Figure 5 introduces conceptual levels of care activities. The framework is based on empirical findings and concept of product extension (Levitt 1980), including four levels: generic, expected, augmented, and potential. On each level, the relationship value both for the customer and the supplier should increase, being the highest on the future activities.

Figure 5: Levels of care activities



The *first* category consists of responsibilities that relate to the installed technology, for instance warranties. These activities have to be provided free of charge and therefore, the focus seems to be on cost-effectiveness.

*Second*, there are activities that support the customer to utilise the existing technology. These activities include technical support, training and leasing services. In addition, many customers want to shift the focus of their business on their own customers and give the whole back-office maintenance to the supplier's responsibility.

The activities on the *third* level include upgrades, enhancements and extensions to the existing solution. Interestingly, in one case company, the upgrades were divided into groups according to the identified customer needs: performance, safety, aesthetics, etc. These advanced activities do not focus on maintaining the installed solution but creating new layers on it. These layers, on the other hand, may further create a new basis for maintenance services.

The *fourth* category consists of activities that relate to the creation of future value, not on enhancement of the present solution. The supplier may offer advanced activities that are often called professional or consulting services. Moreover, high interaction during the relationship enables to co-operate in planning of next generation solutions. In many companies, the main goal of process/business consulting was creation of deeper customer relationships with major accounts instead of invoicing the consulting hours. On the other hand, an interesting issue is how far the customers are ready to count on the suppliers' neutrality for instance in "technical audits" or other recommendations as an expert role. This should be examined in further studies from a customer's point of view.

#### **D. Role, capabilities and resources**

It would seem that the decision of the extent of care activities has to be aligned with the role and general business strategy of the technology supplier. In addition to product expertise, consulting or outsourcing services require deep understanding of customers' business and processes. Customers with strong technical capabilities may not trust on the supplier's capabilities, if they evaluate that the supplier's knowledge could be on the lower level than their own.

The personnel of a technology supplier are usually highly educated and therefore, many companies would like to focus on activities where they can utilise their key capabilities. For this reason, most of the suppliers have given the routine tasks either to customers or third parties that can perform them cost-effectively. However, most of the care activities are aimed to be performed internally, because the direct contact to key customers is considered as a strategic asset. The outsourced activities mainly include contact centre services, small repairs and other very standardised processes that do not require any special expertise.

Furthermore, in the view of some experts, real customer orientation could also mean that the suppliers would not immediately perform all service requests that their customers ask. Instead, they should use their expertise and turn customer needs into value creating long-term solutions. However, this requires from the supplier an advanced management of customer data and internal tacit knowledge.

#### **E. Creation of value packages**

Care activities were seen as a profit centre or a cost centre, depending on a company role. So called "equipment suppliers" focused on keeping the margins of their products on high level and gave added value services free of charge to support that purpose. They considered care as problem solving activity and way of creating deeper customer relationships. On the other hand, "performance suppliers" might even put all other activities to support service business, because it was seen as a main growth path.

Moreover, customer's size and buying behaviour seemed to offer a basis for creation of care packages. Care activities for small local customers are often offered by third parties, because their use is more cost-effective for the supplier than direct contact. However, care packages should be so well defined that third parties are able to provide them to the small customers. Clear specifications for each care package are needed, because small customers with limited resources often ask more service than

they are ready to pay for. On the other hand, despite of conceptual packages, the bundle of care activities was still created for each large customer separately.

The empirical findings suggest that care activities should be based on standardised processes to ensure consistent service quality. For instance, clear explicit targets for service levels, response times and equipment downtimes seem to be needed. If the supplier were not able to meet the agreed targets, it would be responsible to pay sanctions or compensations to the customer.

However, there are always customers who want to order care activities separately “on-call”, not based on contracts. Therefore, a price list “on menu fashion” is needed for these customers, as well as for extensions and enhancements, because they are usually bought separately.

According to the results, total value proposition should be defined for each segment already before the solution selling phase. For instance, to enable the creation of more advanced care packages at the later stage, one equipment supplier offered already in the selling phase a basic package that included remote diagnostics software and data bank.

## **F. Ways of delivering value**

Channels seem to depend on the extent of care activities delivered to the customers. In a few companies, contact centres and help-desks had the main role in care. They were used not only to problem solving but also to outbound selling of extended warranties and upgrading features. In some companies, customer care mainly belonged to the responsibilities of key account team that probably included one dedicated person for customer care. Interestingly, one global supplier had centralised its production but kept the local maintenance network, which enabled to keep regular contact with the customer on his own expense.

Two Internet-based technologies seem to have a special importance for customer care: Extranet and Portals, both of them having their own potential role and specific features. The Extranet enabled the suppliers to offer deeply customised information and a procurement channel of consumables, for instance spare parts. Because of cost effectiveness and easiness of knowledge management, many suppliers trained both third parties (agents/resellers) and direct customers to use the Extranet as their main support channel. The Extranet with an access to the design databases can be used in planning not only extensions but also totally new solutions. This joint development

effort increases the innovative capability of the supplier and enhances further its knowledge of key customers' businesses.

Suppliers had built portals with content-providing partners mainly for two different purposes. To begin with, portals might have about the same role as the Extranet, being an information source and a procurement channel for complementary services, for instance drawings, spare parts and manuals. On the other hand, theme portal seemed to offer a promising forum to create back-selling by sensing end-market needs and to maintain the community with relevant interest groups. By enabling comprehensive knowledge accumulation, the portal can enhance the supplier's strategic vision of the field, critical for a network leadership position. However, the integration of the portal to other care activities appeared to cause problems, because the portals often had the business goals of their own, in addition to corporate targets.

A successful example of integration of the traditional and Internet-channels was based on the use of remote diagnostic software. A few case companies already used the same technology and the others at least considered it. The integrated and proactive care process was the following:

The software with sophisticated sensors monitors the equipment continuously and sends the reports to the their global call centre. A call centre representative analyses the reports and alerts the field mechanic, when necessary. The mechanic arrives at the job site with specific information, tools and parts to work on the equipment.

Management of third parties directly related to channel decisions. In case companies, third parties were used to offer complementary services (e.g. repair services) or act as an intermediary (reseller/agent) between the technology supplier and its smaller customers. A trend seemed to be that the suppliers give their agents more care activities than before to perform and this way increase the agents' role as value-added resellers.

Simultaneously, the supplier should be able to guarantee the performance level of third parties, which is increasingly difficult when the number of partners is high. For this reason, some suppliers have created certification programs with different capability levels. Certification required, in addition to participating in the courses, that the candidate was able to pass the final exam. Because of cost effectiveness and flexibility, many of the training classes were offered through Web-based e-learning systems. Naturally, this systematic education has required investments. However, it has helped to efficiently manage reseller/agent network and this way indirectly to give to customers a consistent and professional picture of the technology supplier's own capabilities.

### **G. Measuring the relationship value for the customer**

Customer satisfaction was the most commonly used measure for relationship value in case companies. In one company, also salary was partly based on the results of customer satisfaction surveys. However, customer satisfaction studies give only a narrow view on care activities. Therefore, they are mainly suitable for performance evaluation of basic support processes, not for the evaluation of the future capabilities, which would require depth interviews and analyses with key accounts.

### **H. Strong value position**

Stable cash flow with reasonable gross margins was one of the targets of customer care. However, only “performance providers” had separately analysed profitability of care activities. “Equipment suppliers” instead saw care mainly as a supportive function that indirectly generates revenues for businesses. Furthermore, many suppliers set as one of their main objectives to improve product quality to be able to decrease warranty costs. Interestingly, in one case company, improved quality decreased maintenance revenues, because extended warranties were not anymore attractive to its customers.

Care activities are rather employee-intensive, which sets restrictions to growth targets. It is difficult to find skilled and experienced people from the labour markets. On the other hand, education of many young and inexperienced people is a rather slow and heavy process for the whole organisation.

In addition to the financial impact, customer care seems to have also other possible influences into the value system. For instance, the sophisticated use of remote maintenance tools and third parties gives new opportunities also for smaller technology companies to serve and interact with global customers. On the other hand, with well-established certification programs, the technology supplier is able to build a strong position within its focal network.

## **6. Conclusions**

The main goals of the study were to define ‘customer care’ and build a conceptual framework for creation of care activities. The definition for customer care is: *A bundle of activities that enable customers to fully utilise the benefits of technology products.*

Customer care combines management of product-related services to management of customer relationships. It starts from cost-effective management of warranty-based responsibilities and continues to creation of advanced value-added products and services.

As described in Figure 4, there are three main factors that affect the creation of care activities: relationship value for the customer segment, characteristics of technology and company role. Planning of care activities seemed to be product-driven, based on lifecycle and complexity of products, and all possibilities of customer-driven approach were not utilised. However, the importance of customer behaviour and strategy (e.g. Verhallen 1998) in creation of care activities has grown. Large global companies, small local companies, and end-customers are the three high level segments that create the basis both for creation and delivery of care activities.

Moreover, company role seems to have a strong relation both to the extent and pricing of care activities. Equipment suppliers focus on cost-effective management of responsibilities and basic supporting activities. The main goal of care is to support the equipment sales, not to obtain direct revenues. Performance providers, on the other hand, have shifted the focus of their business to supporting, advanced and future activities and created sophisticated pricing mechanisms for these activities. These suppliers have also invested in required capabilities, for instance mastering customers' business, to enable the successful delivery of these most challenging care activities.

The results indicated that customer care can be delivered by creating integrated and proactive multi-channel processes and having an advanced network partner strategy with explicit standards for third parties. Development of care activities toward a business model requires both profitability and other performance targets and continuous measurement of relationship value for the customer.

Possible further studies should concentrate on a deep analysis of the conceptual framework with two or three case companies in order to validate the proposed conceptual framework for customer care. The studies could include longitudinal analyses of carefully selected customer relationships. In interviews, the customers' present and future expectations of their supplier's role and care activities would be explored. The results could be compared with the technology supplier's own internal statements and understanding.

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