Mystery Shopping as a Tool for Advanced Interaction Quality in Business Relationships
- an Exploratory Study

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Abstract

In order to remain distinct and to build up strong business relationships in a competitive environment, industrial companies should pay attention – not only to objective factors such as price or product quality – but in particular to their interaction quality. This is due to the fact that customers' satisfaction is shown to be a function of both quality aspects. However, little is known about the investigation of the perceived interaction quality in terms of customer satisfaction to date. For this reason, this paper introduces an innovative way of measuring interaction quality – the concept of mystery shopping – to industrial markets. Hereby, it reports on the development of a concept of mystery shopping that is directed towards the distinct characteristics of industrial markets. Adequate general and specific observation categories are drawn from relevant literature and primary research. A number of research questions are empirically analysed, presenting both a framework for theoretical discussion and managerial implications.

Introduction

Increasing tendencies toward saturation have been recently observable on many industrial markets. The stagnating demand thereby appears even more problematic because a large number of branches had to accept an increase in the fixed cost pool accompanied by a shorter product life cycle. Under the growing pressure of costs and competition, companies can only survive on the market if they concentrate on building up and maintaining long-term business relationships with their customers. In this sense it has been proved that building up a long-term bond with customers requires less investment than acquiring new customers, while creating considerable advantages in terms of effectiveness, as well. The term of relationship marketing is thus moving into the focus of practical efforts, companies no longer make purchases; they establish relationships (Håkansson/Snehota, 1995; Cannon/Perreault, 1999; Narayandas/Rangan, 2004).

Suppliers will, however, only be able to build up stable, long-term relationships with their customers if these are kept satisfied. Hereby it must be considered that industrial markets – compared to consumer markets – are characterized by highly interactive transaction processes between two or more partners in the value chain (Atkin/Skinner, 1975). Besides product quality industrial companies therefore should pay special attention to their interaction quality, as costumers' satisfaction is shown to be a function of both quality aspects. Due to the increasing competition on industrial markets this applies all the more as the herefrom resulting assimilations in product technologies and configurations can no longer serve as a means of customer satisfaction.

The more astonishing does it seem that – although the analysis of buyer-seller interactions occupies a central position within industrial marketing research in general (c.f. Håkansson, 1982) – little is known about the investigation of the perceived interaction quality in terms of customer satisfaction so far (Wilson, 2001). In particular the concept of mystery shopping has not been examined in industrial markets so far.

Against this background, our paper addresses the use of the concept of mystery shopping as a tool for advanced business relationship management. To achieve this goal our paper is organised as follows. In section 2 we will derive the importance of interaction quality for industrial costumers' satisfaction based on the distinct characteristics of industrial transactions processes. Subsequently we will show the relation between theoretical and conceptual research in the field of mystery shopping in order to provide a comprehensive basis for its application on industrial markets. Our paper then reports on the development and empirical analysis of an industrial mystery shopping concept which is directed towards the distinct characteristics of industrial markets. Finally we discuss implications of our findings for both theory and practice.

Importance of interaction quality in business relationships

An interaction perspective on industrial transaction processes

Industrial transaction processes are complex processes (Webster, 1995), which are influenced by a multitude of factors. Amongst others, the interaction between the representatives of the selling and the buying centres play a central role. The reason for this lies in the fact that in industrial markets – unlike in consumer markets – goods and services are often defined in direct interactions between the participating organisations. As a rule it only seems to be possible to address specific customer requirements and to adapt services appropriately in a process of personal exchange (Johnston/Bonoma, 1977; Johnston/McQuiston, 1984). It therefore does not seem astonishing that industrial marketing research usually does not focus on the SOR-paradigm but rather investigates the interaction process between buyers and sellers.

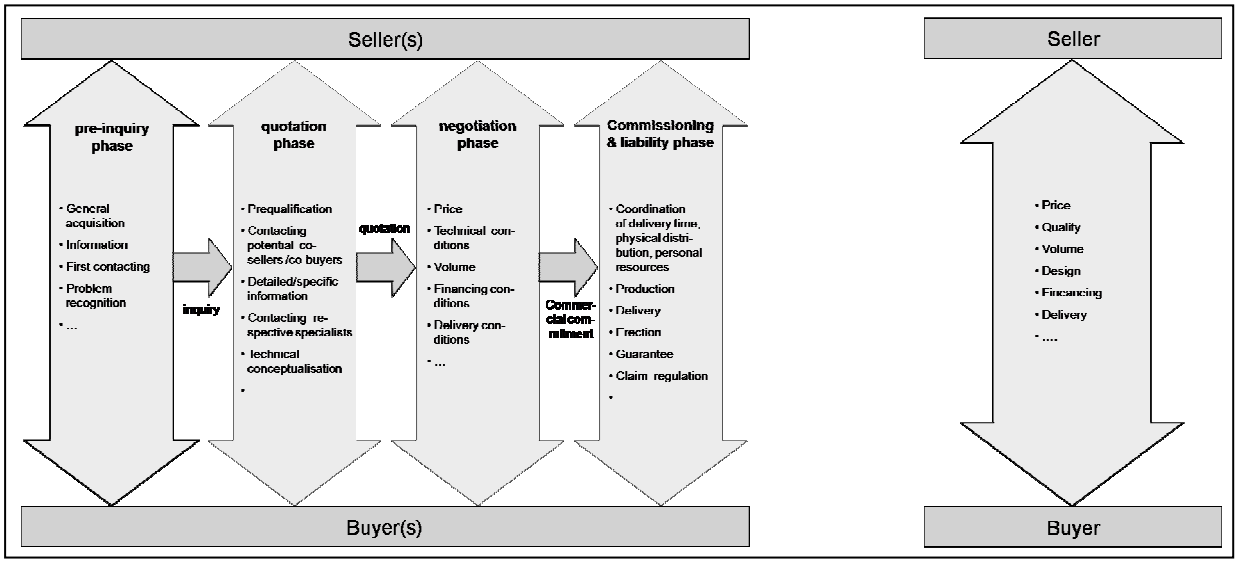
In this context various approaches have structured the interaction process by means of phases e.g. Webster, 1965; Kelly, 1974, or Backhaus/Günter, 1976), in which different types of buyer-seller

interaction can be identified. Even though the individual phases empirically can seldom be defined without overlapping, their investigation allows for a detailed systemisation of the whole transaction process.

Regardless of their individual definition of number and content of the phases, interaction approaches usually begin with the definition of a specific demand on the part of the customer and encompass the first contact and the choice of supplier for the negotiation phase. Here the specific agreements with respect to the planned transaction are defined. However a transaction usually does not end with the negotiated agreement but often leads to further interaction within the framework of project realisation and liability (e.g. the joint installation in the case of the procurement of a complex machine) (Backhaus/Günter, 1976). In this context it becomes clear that although the negotiating phase is of great significance for the ultimate contract, a variety of interactions between the buyer and the seller must take place in advance (cf. figure 1). Equally, the success of the business relationship depends upon ex-post interaction.

Our above illustrations become once more clear in figure 1. They allow for the conclusion that next to objective criteria such as price the perceived customer satisfaction also depends on the perceived quality of the buyer-seller interactions during the entire transaction process (Cunningham/Turnball, 1982; Turnball, 1990).

FIGURE 1: INDUSTRIAL VS. CONSUMER MARKET INTERACTION



Difficulties in analysing interaction quality

In order to be able to achieve the highest possible level of customer satisfaction it thus seems necessary for industrial sellers to analyse both quality aspects. Hereby it must however be taken into account that, in contrast to the objective criteria of costumer satisfaction, there are specific problems involved in measuring the interaction quality. This is due to the fact that no tangible and enduring criteria, such as price, are available for an evaluation of the interaction quality. It rather exists only for the period of interaction and is also highly subjective. The most important difficulty however lies in the fact that interaction quality cannot be measured by looking only at one transaction party – either the buyer or the seller – in an isolated way, but has to be analysed by taking both buyer and seller behaviours into consideration together. This is true because the quality of interaction always is the result of an interpersonal exchange (Backhaus/Büschken, 1997; Bonoma/Zaltman, 1978).

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The more astonishing does it seem that the measurement of interaction quality in industrial markets where done at all, has been investigated by traditional survey methods until now. These normally only take the buyer's or the seller's perspective into consideration and thus obviously do not constitute an appropriate measurement method. In order to analyse both perspectives simultaneously, both research and practice have shown the use of the mystery shopping concept to be an accepted device for measuring interaction quality in consumer markets. Mystery Shopping thereby constitutes a well-known customer satisfaction measurement technique, which serves as an evaluation tool for assessing both product and especially, interaction quality. Consequently, it would be interesting to see, whether mystery shopping is also an adequate way of measuring the buyer-seller interaction quality on industrial markets. In order to answer this question we must first of all take a closer look at the concept of mystery shopping.

The concept of Mystery Shopping as a tool for analysing interaction quality in industrial markets

The concept of Mystery Shopping

In order to provide a deeper understanding of the concept of Mystery Shopping we will outline its basic idea, its objectives and procedure, some regulatory and ethical aspects concerning its application as well as its fields of application and its current state of research.

Basic idea of Mystery Shopping

Mystery shopping as a research technique is growing in popularity (Dawson/Hillier, 1995). It is a widely accepted concept for measuring the quality of interaction between buyers and sellers in consumer markets. More precisely, mystery shopping is a form of participant observation, where researchers act as customers or potential customers to monitor transaction processes (Wilson, 1998a).

Mystery shopping involves visits by specially trained assessors, called mystery shoppers, to shops, restaurants, banks, or other business in which the quality of interaction is to be appraised. Hereby the mystery shoppers are given instructions to simulate a typical transaction in order to experience and measure any interaction and service process, by acting as (potential) customers and report back on their experiences in a detailed and objective way (MRS, 2005). Therefore, a key advantage of mystery shopping is that sellers are not aware that they are participating in a study.

Mystery shoppers should be independent, critical, objective, and anonymous. They must be trained in relation to the instrument, but also in relation to the specific situation and context of the organization where the visits take place. The resulting interaction quality is assessed against the specific criteria in an observation questionnaire, which typically includes rating scales, checklists, and open-ended responses. Hereby a high degree of accuracy in reporting must be maintained to enable the targeting of subsequent improvements by management.

Objectives of Mystery Shopping

Mystery shopping is used for various objectives. Most of the time its aim is to measure the interaction quality in personal exchange processes. In this situation the mystery shopper can be focussed on compliance with specific quality standards, guidelines or demands, or the mystery shopper can be instructed to position the quality of interaction on a scale. If a mystery shopper is also used to measure not only services and interactions of the own company but also of competitors, benchmarking becomes a way to judge and compare your own activities. Besides this, other goals of mystery shopping are for example: measuring the effectiveness of (training) programs

(Morrison/Colman/Preston, 1997) or testing against discrimination (Tepper, 1994). Overall Wilson (1998b) identified that the results of mystery shopping can be used for one or more of the following objectives.

(1) To act as a diagnostic tool identifying failings and weak points in an organization's service delivery.

(2) To encourage, develop and motivate sellers by linking with appraisal, training and reward mechanisms.

(3) To access the competitiveness of an organization's service provision by benchmarking it against the offerings of others in an industry.

Procedure of Mystery Shopping

A typical mystery shopping study usually involves the following steps:

Step 1: Problem definition and determination of objectives

The first step in the design of a mystery shopping study is to define objectives. The company's problem has to be verbalised and concretised. Is there an acute concern, e.g. a problem with the volume of sales or an escalation of complaints about interaction and service quality? Or does company management lack information e.g. about the process of dealing with customer inquiries?

Step 2: Formulation of the observation questionnaire

As a next step the observation questionnaire has to be formulated in relation to the determined objectives. This questionnaire has to be developed by going through the interaction process and paying attention to failure points in those processes that have been made in earlier customer contacts and/or studies. Adequate categories and criteria with adequate items have to be identified. These illustrations show that the observation questionnaire is very important for the derivation of practical implications. Therefore, it should be tested in a preliminary study and possibly adapted.

Step 3: Selection and training of the testers

After the formulation of the observation questionnaire, qualified mystery shoppers have to be selected. These should represent the company's target market and therefore match their socio-demographic (age, gender, or educational background) and psychographic (lifestyle, preferences, or attitudes) characteristics. In order to secure the reliability of the results an intensive instruction and training of the mystery shopper is indispensable.

Step 4: Data gathering and reporting

In the run-up to the real study the objects – specific interactions, establishments or employees – which are to be observed must be defined. These could be objects of one's own company or, in benchmarking, of other companies.

Step 5: Evaluation

Finally collected data are evaluated and interpreted. Hereby first of all the current status of interaction quality – seen from a customer's point of view – should be identified. Comparing it to ideal interaction quality standards it becomes possible to derive implications for advanced customer satisfaction.

Regulatory and ethical questions

In regard to regulatory and ethical questions of the concept of mystery shopping it first of all can be stated that a company in general is allowed to gather information about the quality of its buyer-seller interactions. However, there are some limitations. In this context researchers carrying out a mystery shopper study must guarantee individual privacy as far as possible. For example, they have to take care that the observed persons – in our case industrial sellers – will not be disadvantaged or harmed through the study and its results. Provided that a mystery shopping study is carried out professionally and with appropriate safeguards for sellers' rights, it is a valid and legal activity. External testers – such as research institutes, agencies or consultancies – have to make all data anonymous so that the tested persons cannot be identified. It is neither legitimate to mention names, positions, stores or time of survey, nor to give any kind of indications that could help the company management to trace these data. Benchmarking is also legal in principle as long as data protection and personal rights are respected. Several organisations such as ESOMAR (European Society for Opinion and Marketing Research) have established diverse guidelines that are intended to ensure the professionalism and seriousness of mystery shopping studies (ESOMAR, 2005).

Fields of application for Mystery Shopping

Mystery shopping can tap its full potential best in those sectors, in which it comes to an intensive exchange between buyer and seller. An intensive contact is to be understood as a direct interaction between employee and customer, either via telephone or mail, in the form of a counselling interview, a personal product introduction or – in the most intensive case – during a negotiation. The sales and advisory staff exercise a direct impact on the customer and hence on the number of purchases and the volume of sales. Thus, it is used extensively by organisations in financial services, retailing, motor dealerships, hotels and catering, passenger transportation, public utilities and government departments. Most examples of mystery shopping in literature can usually be related to these types of organisations.

The current state of research into Mystery Shopping

In this context mystery shopping has already become one of the most frequently used tools in research into sales and distribution in consumer markets (Dwek, 1996). Hereby, as already mentioned, it is usually intended to improve profitability at the point of sale and increase customer satisfaction by optimising interaction quality. But despite the popularity of mystery shopping in a lot of business areas, surprisingly little discussion about this technique has appeared in academic literature (Finn/Kayandé, 1999). Hence, also on consumer markets there is a certain backlog demand concerning scientifically proven insights. In this context a review of the available literature shows that in selected journals in the areas of Marketing (e.g. Miles, 1993; Cramp, 1994; Burnside, 1994 or Cobb, 1995) and of General Economics (e.g. Wilson, 1998b; van der Wiele/Boselie/Hesselink, 2002; van der Wiele/ Hesselink/van Iwaarden, 2005) only a few research papers have been published on mystery shopping during the recent years. More papers are published in the area of banking (Leeds, 1992 and 1995; Hanke, 1993; Hoffman, 1993; Stovall, 1993; Dorman, 1994; Holliday, 1994; Morrall, 1994; Tepper, 1994; Hotchkiss, 1995; Dwek, 1996 or Feig, 2005) or tourism and gastronomy (Erstad, 1998; Wilson/Gutmann, 1998; Anderson et al., 2001; Tribe, 2002 or Garber, 2004). As already mentioned, mystery shopping has not been examined in industrial markets so far. This is all the more astonishing as the concept of mystery shopping disposes – next to its general advantages – of specific advantages concerning industrial interaction processes.

Advantages of the concept of Mystery Shopping for industrial markets

General advantages

In general, mystery shopping is known as an excellent market research technique because it overcomes many of the potential weaknesses of traditional survey research. One of these weaknesses lies in the fact that there is often a discrepancy between real and reported behaviour

(Friedrichs/Ludtke, 1975). This is also due to the fact that traditional consumer surveys are retrospective. Consumers are asked about an interaction which may have taken place a long-time ago. Mystery shopping studies in contrast constitute the replay of what happened when a buyer or potential buyer interacts with a seller. In this, mystery shopping provides a further advantage because it enables the researcher to experience and measure a variety of interaction elements that the interviewed person is often not conscious of and that are therefore not easy to discover by questioning (Miles, 1993; Burnside, 1994; Cramp, 1994; Newton, 1994; Dwek, 1996). Consequently, mystery shopping helps to develop a richer knowledge of the experimental nature of the interaction.

A further general advantage of the concept of mystery shopping is the fact that, contrary to traditional ways of measuring interaction quality, mystery shopping studies can provide both a supplementary source of subjective quality ratings (e.g. politeness or helpfulness of the seller) and objective characteristics of an interaction (e.g. waiting time) (Finn/Kayandé, 1999; Finn, 2001).

In the same context the concept of mystery shopping disposes the advantage that "real" customers do not always notice poor processes, or even worse if they do notice, they do not always complain or express their dissatisfaction. In this context the research of *TAPR (Technical Assistance Research Program)* shows that 26 out of 27 dissatisfied customers do not express their dissatisfaction, however, 63% will never buy again.

Overall it is noticeable that mystery shopping studies which are properly designed and executed are usually more reliable and valid than conventional market research surveys. This is likely to be the case because mystery shoppers spend more time observing and are motivated to respond to the items more carefully. Unlike customers, they are paid and trained to be observant while "shopping". In this context a study of Finn/Kayandé (1999) produced the interesting result that an individual mystery shopper provides higher quality data than an individual customer when evaluating the same survey construct. Moreover the reliability of mystery shopping data was much higher than that of customer surveys.

Specific advantages

Next to the general advantages, we would like to point out some specific advantages of mystery shopping when conducted in industrial markets. This is due to the fact that – in contrast to consumer surveys – one has to consider certain data collection problems when interviewing industrial buyers. (Hague, 1985). First, surveys are generally perceived as very time-consuming, which affects willingness to participate (Tomaskovic-Devey/Leiter/Thompson, 1994). Second, industrial buyers often do not wish to disclose any information, fearing that it will give the interviewer too much detailed knowledge of the company's situation (Hall, 1975; Knoke/Marsden/Kalleberg, 2002; Tomaskovic-Devey/Leiter/Thompson, 1995). Apart from this, it is also possible that they respond in a consciously strategic manner, which would lead to biased data.

Consequently, the information necessary to investigate interaction quality, in the quantity and quality required for analytical purposes, can only be compiled under conditions of compounded difficulty (e.g. Block/Block, 1995). Therefore, mystery shopping should be regarded as a valuable alternative to the traditional survey research of data collection in industrial markets.

Transferability of the concept to industrial markets

Despite the depicted general and specific advantages of mystery shopping for measuring interaction quality (Finn/Kayandé, 1999), the concept has not been examined in an industrial context so far.

Beyond the simple justification that industrial transaction processes are very complex and heterogeneous and thus hardly allow for an objective assessment of their interactional operations we particularly see two further reasons for this notable disregard:

First, industrial buyer-seller transactions are usually completed within shielded negotiation settings. Consequently, an observation of the displayed interaction quality becomes much more difficult in industrial markets than in consumer markets. In this context it must however be noticed that – according to the illustrations given in section 2 – negotiations about the final agreements always require some pre-transactional phases in terms of information gathering or initial contacting. As these phases are often fulfilled on observable sights, the argument of non-observability can no longer justify the identified research gap. Industrial market research should rather investigate how far the perceived interaction quality in the pre-inquiry phase (c.f. figure 1) can be improved, in order to ensure the subsequent agreement of a joint contract. In this, trade shows are viewed as an important sight of information gathering among buyers and also sellers (Kirchgeorg, 2005). Therefore industrial mystery shopping on trade shows could be considered as an adequate measurement of interaction quality between buyers and sellers.

A second reason for the paucity of research as well as of practitioners' activities in mystery shopping could lie in the fact that industrial mystery shopping simulations may differ significantly from those in consumer markets. This is due to the many different facets of industrial market transactions (Anderson/Narus, 2004). In this context it must be noticed that – compared to the individual buying decisions in consumer markets – multi-personal decision making bodies (*buying centres*) make purchasing decisions (Johnston/Lewin, 1996), depending on their different roles and positions (Kelley, 1974). The members of these buying centres are normally highly qualified professionals who tend to make decisions supported by *logical reasoning* and with a lesser tendency to impulse buying. Against this background it is not astonishing that industrial purchase decisions often constitute *formalized and long-term interaction processes* (Webster/Wind, 1972). Regarding the discussed characteristics, it becomes evident that goods and services in the industrial sector represent solutions to problems. They are intended to fulfill a concrete need. In contrast to consumer markets they are often developed in co-operation between sellers and buyers and are highly customised.

However, despite the discussed peculiarities, one has to consider that interaction processes in both consumer and industrial markets can also be characterised by similar criteria. In this sense – independently of the market perspective – the external presence of a company, its personnel and informational behaviour do matter in both markets whenever the interaction quality shall be comprehensively examined.

These results show that the concept of mystery shopping can be applied to the industrial sector in general, though it requires specific adaptations. More concretely, an observation questionnaire that is able to cover the interaction quality of industrial transactions should include both general mystery shopping categories (that can be transferred from existing observation schemes) as well as specific categories that are able to investigate and measure the discussed peculiarities of buyer-seller interactions in an industrial context. In order to further analyse interaction quality in industrial markets, we will therefore now develop a concept of mystery shopping, which is directed towards the distinct characteristics of industrial markets. As a first starting point we hereby chose the examination of the interaction quality in the pre-inquiry phase of industrial transaction processes. This seems reasonable as interaction phase 1 was shown to be of high relevance. Besides, it can be easily observed.

Development of an industrial Mystery Shopping approach

Method and objectives of this research

Because prior research has not examined the concept of mystery shopping in the industrial sector, we chose to use a sequential design which applies both qualitative and quantitative studies. Our qualitative studies thereby consisted of two steps: in-depth interviews of current industrial

professionals as well as a pre-test study in a real trade show. After summarising the results of both studies, we conducted our main study, in order to quantitatively investigate the buyer-seller interaction quality in a selected branch (de Ruyter/Scholl, 1998; Morgen/Smircich, 1980). Based on our aforementioned conclusions, our methodology was designed to address the following research questions:

Due to the fact that the concept of mystery shopping has not been applied in industrial markets, we first of all were interested to answer research question 1:

Q1: What general observation categories can be adapted from consumer concepts of mystery shopping and what are the specific observation categories for industrial markets?

Hereunto we were able to pose research question 2:

Q2: Is our adapted mystery shopping concept an appropriate method to analyse the interaction quality of industrial selling companies? This means, is our developed observation questionnaire – next to the general observation categories – also capable of depicting the distinct characteristics of industrial interaction processes?

Besides the analysis of the general and especially the specific observation categories for industrial markets, we were interested in how far implications of the concept of industrial mystery shopping could be derived for industrial marketers. Therefore, we included research question 3 in our study:

Q3: What are important aspects for improving buyer-seller interaction quality in business relationships?

Qualitative studies

As we were able to assume, that existing concepts of mystery shopping can offer valuable insights but that new categories reflecting the specific characteristics of industrial markets were necessary, we conducted preliminary studies for developing adapted categories among industrial practitioners (study 1). These categories were tested for objectivity, reliability, and validity in a real trade show (study 2). The results were then entered into an observation questionnaire for industrial markets.

Study 1. In the first qualitative study, we conducted in-depth interviews with 16 sales and purchase experts of seven well-known business companies. Within our sample selection we ensured that all of these companies are represented on famous industrial trade shows. In order to get perspectives of different industrial markets, we chose business companies from different business types.

All in-depth interviews were conducted face to face and structured by guidelines containing the following questions: Firstly, the interviewees were asked to indicate the importance of trade shows – especially with regard to the successful conclusion of a contract. This appears necessary in order to confirm our approach to conduct mystery shopping in regard to interaction phase 1. We then asked the experts what the basis for a high buyer-seller-interaction quality is. Hereby we especially asked for important factors of good interaction quality with regard to trade shows. By means of content analysis we structured the collected information of study 1 and developed a first pilot observation questionnaire. In this we paid attention to formulating and distinguishing our newly derived observation categories as clearly as possible.

Study 2. To examine the efficacy (objectivity, reliability, validity) of this pilot observation questionnaire, we conducted a pre-test study in a real trade show. In order to optimise our results, we chose the same setting as was planned for our main study and thus the same trade show. During our pilot study, 36 buyer-seller interactions were observed.

Results. In study 1 we were able to identify 3 general and 3 specific observation categories for industrial markets, each consisting of several items (c.f. table 1). The general ones are the categories of "physical facilities", "personnel" and "information behaviour". Our specific categories included observation items covering the "rationality" of the industrial purchase process, the structure and role behaviour of the "buying center" as well as the procedure of the ongoing "decision-making process". Whereas our identified categories proved to be reasonable, we made some changes concerning the item structure based on the results of study 2. Our final observation scheme for the main study is depicted in table 1.

TABLE 1: OBSERVATION CATEGORIES

General	Physical facilities	Stand size	Stand Atmosphere	Stand characteristics	Catering				
	Personnel	Sociable and interested sellers	Seriousness	Time to wait	Name plates	Buyer introduction	Attention	Patience	Interruptions
	Information behavior	Homepage	Replying to inquiries	Information on stand	Information to take with	Information sent after trade show			
specific	Rationality	Structured interaction	Objectiveness	Emotionality	Small talk				
	Buying Center	Buyers involved in interaction	Hierarchical/functional Position	Price	Risk	Technical explanations			
	Decision-making process	Duration	Activity	Tailored to needs	Alternative solutions	Cross selling	"All-in-one"-Solution	Phases	

Concerning all categories, the operationalized items could be rated on a yes/no scale, a 1-3 Likert scale, or a 1-6 Likert scale. Besides this, there were also some open questions.

Quantitative study

In order to test our proposed research questions, our main study was built upon the following three study steps:

Step 1: Point of survey

First of all we had to choose a point of survey. Herefore we chose a famous international trade show of the packaging industry. Among others, companies (in total 1,356) from the following sectors were represented: packaging techniques, packaging machines, packaging instruments, as well as packaging recycling. There was a balanced proportion of large, medium-sized and small companies. The diversity of products and services offered, as well as their price differences were also high. These circumstances provided a good basis for the accomplishment of our research objectives.

Step 2: Purchase scenarios

Secondly, we had to develop very detailed purchase scenarios in order to simulate realistic buyer-seller interactions (Collins/Turner, 2005). In order to display the heterogeneity of the chosen trade show, we developed the following five purchase scenarios:

Scenario 1: "Mobile Storage World" (MSW)

The fictitious company MSW is a young company producing and selling mobile hardware storage media. The problem, for which the MSW buyers wanted to find a solution at our chosen trade show, concerned the packaging of the hardware. A foldable cardboard package with a surface, which could

be designed and coloured by MSW, was required for the presentation and the transportation of the products.

Scenario 2: “Academic library”

Although all media (books, collected editions, periodicals) of each department in a German university are documented in the central library of the university, due to the different systems in the different departments, it is not possible to find out centrally whether a media has been lent out, is earmarked or is available. This is due to the fact that the university lacks a standardized labelling and database system as well as a barcode printer. Compared to the purchase scenario of “MSW”, the level of complexity and the degree of individualisation necessary was considerably higher for the “university buyers”.

Scenario 3: “Loudspeaker systems – QPC”

The fictitious company QPC sells loudspeaker systems in set sizes of between four and eight pieces of equipment. These sets are rudimentarily packed on euro-pallets by the manufacturer and delivered to the QPC office by vehicle. Then QPC packs the systems more elaborately for transportation via parcel service. In order to do this, adequate cardboard packaging material is required as well as, even more importantly, a padding for the protection of the loudspeakers against damage during transportation.

Scenario 4: “Hardware pack”

A company purchases network interface and graphic cards for personal computers. From this material they compile a pack consisting of a PC-card, a connection cable, an installation compact disc with compatible driver and a short version of installation-guidelines. For this pack they are looking for an adequate packaging solution.

Scenario 5: “*Lorch* welding technology”

This company was searching for a packaging solution for a newly developed welding apparatus. This solution had to meet certain requirements such as e.g. robustness, design, volume, or price.

In order to guarantee a comprehensive evaluation of the interaction quality of the companies represented on our chosen trade show, all scenarios were structured in three phases:

- pre-trade-show interaction phase,
- trade-show interaction phase, and
- post-trade-show interaction phase.

Pre-trade-show interaction phase:

The pre-trade-show interaction phase comprised an anonymous contact, the visit of the provider’s homepage, in order to gather information about the seller’s performance profile and presence at the trade show. In order to analyse the interaction quality before the first personal contact we sent e-mails concerning the “scenarion-problem” to all companies selected for each scenario 14 days before the beginning of the trade show. The reactions during the remaining days until the beginning of the trade show were documented.

Trade-show interaction phase:

The trade-show interaction phase consisting of the personal contact at the trade show between mystery shopper and selected company constituted the main part of our scenarios. The mystery shopper visited the stand and turned to the seller for advice concerning the “scenario-problem”. In doing so, he tried to channel the interaction in a way that would make it possible to measure all the items of this phase. These observations gave an account of the rating of the stand, the appearance of its employees as well

as the course of the conversation. Besides objective facts like the size of the stand and the number of employees, the employees' visual appearance as well as their discernable willingness to advise was judged. The mystery shopper furthermore recorded how he perceived the entire atmosphere at the stand and whether he would feel comfortable as a customer.

Yet, the main focus was clearly set on the rating of the course of conversation. Recorded were, amongst others, the way the seller started the conversation, his or her active impact on the conversation, the structure, relevance, emotionality and attention during the conversation as well as the quality of advice. Hereby the mystery shopper was asked to analyse whether advice was tailored to suit the customer's needs, whether supporting remedies were used and whether alternatives were pointed out. Also recorded was the address of different buying center roles, e.g. information about costs, techniques, risks and practical benefits. Finally the seller's further proceeding considering the buyer's problem was recorded. Here we paid attention to the question whether an active pursuit was signalized and how the conversation was finished.

Post-trade- show interaction phase:

Finally, the post-trade-show interaction phase covered the activities following the observations made on the trade-show. Where further action, e.g. tender generation, sending of detailed information, or another contact with the seller was promised, compliance with such promises was monitored in the four weeks subsequent to the trade-show. If data were received during this time, their quality and usefulness for the mystery shopper were evaluated.

Step 3: Selection and training of Mystery Shoppers

In order to maximise the reliability of our study, the mystery shoppers were carefully selected and trained. In contrast to the observations of our pilot study, which was exclusively conducted by two doctoral students, eight additional graduate students were selected as mystery shoppers in the main study. To guarantee the objectivity of the data collected, each interaction simulation was conducted by two shoppers. Moreover all shoppers underwent a careful selection as well as an intensive training process.

Crucial for the mystery shoppers' recruitment was a natural, open-minded and communicative personality along with an interest in research activities and a confident and respectable appearance. Because the recruited mystery shoppers were not experienced in mystery shopping, we placed high emphasis on the mystery shoppers' training. In a first step they were familiarised with the tool "mystery shopping", its goals, rules, and methodology. After that, the mystery shoppers concerned themselves intensively with the packaging industry and the scenarios upon which they were to act. Since it was very important, that the scenarios could realistically be acted out by the students, the recruiting process paid attention that the personality of the shoppers fitted the fictitious companies.

Based on these three steps, we were able to collect 112 useful observation questionnaires resulting from 115 observed buyer-seller interactions. In total the developed mystery shopping studies were represented in equal parts. The resulting findings were as follows:

Research findings

We posed research question 1 in order to find out what general observation categories can be adapted from consumer concepts of mystery shopping and what are the specific observation categories for industrial markets. In order two answer this question we can draw upon our two qualitative studies. Here we identified, as already mentioned, 3 general observation categories – physical facilities, personnel, and information behaviour – which could be adapted from existing concepts of mystery shopping in consumer markets and 3 specific observation categories – rationality, buying centre, and

decision-making process – which are specific to industrial markets and pay regard to the characteristics of industrial markets.

In order to test whether our concept of mystery shopping is an appropriate method to analyse the interaction quality of industrial selling companies (cf. research question Q2), we conducted a quantitative study (study 3) on a trade show. Here our results let us assume that our newly developed observation questionnaire is able to display the specific characteristics of industrial markets in a valid manner. This is due to the fact that all categories could be answered during the shopping simulations and proved to be relevant for buyer-seller interactions. In this sense our findings for example show that 99.12% of all transaction processes were conducted rationally. Emotions were recognisable in only 17.39% of all interactions. All other interactions and conversations were conducted very objectively. Besides we found out that interactions were mostly structured (80.87%) (*rationality*).

Next to the rationality category, our results can confirm the theoretical concept of buying and selling-centre roles. This is due to the fact that oftentimes different roles, for example sellers and engineers, took part in the interaction process (*buying center*). Hereby it also became evident that partial solutions to the individual problem of the mystery shoppers were provided according to the respective roles of the selling team-members (*decision making process*). Interactions were therefore largely (88.39%) tailored to the specific needs and problems of the mystery shoppers.

Besides a verification of the extent to which our questionnaire is capable of reflecting the distinct characteristics of industrial interaction processes, it is necessary to test the validity of the data in order to give a comprehensive answer to Q2. Hereby, validity refers to the degree to which an instrument truly measures the construct that it is intended and supposed to measure (Peter, 1979). A necessary condition for valid measurements thereby constitutes their reliability. It can be broadly defined as the degree to which measurements are free from error and therefore yield consistent results.

In order to verify the reliability of our findings we drew upon the so-called “inter-shopper reliability” (ISR). ISR represents criteria newly developed by the authors, which measure – comparable to the inter-coder reliability in content analysis of Holsti (1969) – the reliability of the mystery shopper’s observation. Holsti’s inter-coder reliability is the percentage of all coding decisions made by pairs of coders on which the coders agree (Lombard/Snyder-Duch/Bracken, 2002). Therefore, inter-coder reliability measures the extent to which different coders agree in the coding of the same responses or observations. In analogy to this the “ISR” can be defined as the extent to which similar observations made by different mystery shoppers would provide the same results. The examination of ISR thereby follows equations 1 and 2.

(1) $$ISR_{1,2} = \frac{2SO}{SO_1 + SO_2}$$

(2) $$ISR_{total} = \frac{1}{n}\sum ISR_{ij}$$

$ISR_{1,2}$: ISO extent to which similar observations were made by shopper 1 and shopper 2

SO: number of similar shopper observations made by shopper 1 and shopper 2

SO_1, SO_2 : number of shopper observations made by shopper 1, shopper 2

The problem of these equations is that they, and the resulting index, are only applicable at a bivariate nominal level. But we used different scales (nominal scales, three-point Likert-type scales, six-point Likert-type scales and open questions). Therefore, in order to measure the extent to which similar observations were made by the shopper, we had to distinguish according to the scaling of the observation categories. As a consequence we decided to weight the observations appropriately. More in detail we introduced a weighting-corrected coefficient according to the number of different answer possibilities. Thus, we weighted a similar observation for a nominally-scaled category with 2, a similar observation for a three-point Likert-type scaled category with a 3 and a similar observation for a six-point Likert-type scaled category with a 6. As a consequence similar observations made by two mystery shoppers for six-point scaled categories had a greater influence on the ISR than similar

observations made for nominally-scaled categories. The examination of our weighted inter-shopper reliability (ISR_w) follows equation 3 and 4.

(3) $$ISR_{w1,2} = \frac{\sum_{1}^{n} SO_n \cdot w_n}{\sum_{1}^{n} S_1O_n \cdot w_n + S_2O_n \cdot w_n}$$

With the following "observation values":

$SO_n = 1$, if $S_1O_n = S_2O_n$

$SO_n = 0$, if $S_1O_n \neq S_2O_n$

(4) $$ISR_{wtotal} = \frac{1}{n} \sum ISR_{wij}$$

w_n: number of possible observations of question n

SO_n: "observation value" of question n

S_1O_n: observation of shopper 1 of question n

All in all, our main study achieved an ISR_{total} of 0.87 (good). For the ISR_{wtotal} we obtained 0.81 and therefore the weighted inter-shopper reliability was also good. Consequently, we may conclude that our collected data is highly reliable. For this reason the study on hand may serve as a first starting point for an advanced interaction quality in buyer-seller relationships. Therefore we can go on to answer research question 3 and investigate to what extent implications can be derived for industrial marketers.

Hereby, our results show that although the observed industrial sellers dispose of a good interaction quality in the specific observation categories (such as the structure of their argumentation line), there is a high potential for improvement in the general observation categories. The most interesting result hereby is that simple measures should be undertaken in order to improve interaction quality.

In the *physical facilities* category for example, our mystery shopping observations show that the atmosphere of only 7.83% of our evaluated stands was rated as entirely satisfactory. Most stands are simply, but clearly arranged (93.91%), which is indeed very good. However, industrial buyers also often want a better designed stand, as our expert interviews (study 1) indicate. In this context some kind of entertainment – such as flat screens or music – which only 26.96% of the visited stands provided, could be a meaningful device. A further aspect where improvements are necessary and could be easily implemented is catering. Here it was interesting to see that catering was provided on 65.22% of stands, nevertheless on only 33.04% were drinks offered.

Additionally, the category of *personnel* also offers some opportunities for improvement, which should be realized by industrial sellers. Although sellers were largely serious, polite and listened very attentively, only 62.61% introduced themselves with their name and only 9.52% even stated their position in the company. Such information, however, is quite important to buyers. Furthermore contacting could be pursued more actively. 40.87% of the observed sellers contacted the mystery shopper after a subtle request. This aspect represents a central cause for dissatisfaction from the buyer's point of view. This is due to the fact that under increasing competition the buyers' willingness to wait is constantly decreasing. Besides the weaknesses concerning first contacting, we further noticed a significant backlog of demand in post-trade-show interaction phase. The reason for this is that 40.32% of the sellers did not give their business cards to the buyers and 28.70% did not ask for the business cards of the buyers. This could lead to missing interesting and profitable contacts.

The most important aspects for improving buyer-seller interaction quality could probably be identified in the category of *information behaviour*. This applies to all three phases – the pre-trade-show interaction phase, the trade-show interaction phase, as well as the post-trade-show interaction phase. So the companies' internet presence and especially the information about their presence at the trade fair is only rated as average. Although there was enough information on the stands (e.g. booklets, flyers or prototypes) in only 33.91% of our observations was information given to the mystery shopper to take with him. Whereas industrial sellers might argue that mystery shoppers do not then have to carry it about with them, our results from the post-trade-show interaction phase also show that in only 29.58% of the interactions was the promised information received. And in only 31.67% of these cases was information material tailored to the mystery shopper's need. Consequently with regard to information behaviour – before, during, and also after the trade-show – there is great need for action,

but also a great potential for industrial sellers. Altogether these examples show that there are a lot of possibilities for a future advanced interaction quality in business relationships.

Discussion

Theoretical and managerial implications

Our research transfers the concept of mystery shopping to the industrial sector. Of key interest to our research was whether the concept of mystery shopping is also a suitable way of measuring interaction quality of business relationships in industrial markets. In this context we analysed what are relevant observation categories adopted from consumer concepts of mystery shopping (general categories) and which observation categories should be added for a comprehensive coverage of industrial interaction processes (specific categories). We secondly tested our adapted mystery shopping concept at an industrial trade show in order to derive practical implications for an improved quality of buyer-seller interactions.

Overall our results indicate that the concept of mystery shopping, considering the distinct circumstances of industrial markets, constitutes a suitable way of measuring buyer-seller interaction quality. In this, besides general categories, specific categories such as rationality, buying centre, and decision-making process, which reflect the particular characteristics of industrial markets, are necessary. Therefore, concepts of mystery shopping in consumer markets can only serve as a first point of reference.

Furthermore, our study revealed, that there are important items of interaction quality – such as stand atmosphere, industrial acquisition, and information behaviour before, during, and also after the trade show – which have to be taken into consideration in order to improve customer satisfaction in business relationships. Managerial action is urgently needed, especially regarding the latter. One reason for this lies in the fact that under today's speed of technological change, the perceived uncertainty by the buyer is constantly growing. Perceived uncertainty however can best be reduced by a comprehensive information behaviour on the seller's site.

With this need for more comprehensive information sellers are called upon to focus on the training of their sales personnel. They must have detailed and comprehensive information about the features of their own as well as of competitors' products in order to be able to communicate their competitive advantage. It is a well-known fact, that more and better information provided by sales personnel can reduce this risk as well as help differentiate the product from those of competitors. The skills and competencies necessary can thereby be communicated and trained in special courses and workshops, but also through new media, computer software, intranet, or instructional videos.

Next to the implications we would like to point out that mystery shopping should be used in an open and transparent way. A reason for this lies in the fact that the communication of the use of mystery shopping throughout the whole organisation already gives a signal to pay more attention to the perception of real customers. In this context the success of a mystery shopping study is decisively dependent on the genuine involvement of the management.

Limitations and future research

As with all social science research, however, it is important to recognize and point out its limitations. As a first limitation of our study the relatively small sample size as well as the small number of companies analysed must be considered. This leads to the fact that no final statements, which can serve as generalisations, can be derived from it. Consequently the managerial implications, which were proposed for improving the quality of interaction, cannot be generalised for all industrial sectors and business companies.

A further limitation could be seen in the fact that our research relied on inexperienced mystery shoppers. In this context it must however be considered that – as mentioned above – the mystery

shoppers were carefully selected and trained. The effectiveness of this process is shown by the good inter-shopper reliability.

Nevertheless, the described limitations provide indications for further research: In particular a further examination of our concept of industrial mystery shopping with an extended sample size should be undertaken. An issue requiring further investigation is also whether more experienced or rigorously trained shoppers provide substantially higher quality data.

Moreover it has to be considered that our developed concept of mystery shopping in industrial markets only represents a first step in research. In this context we see further research areas in three main directions: Firstly, future research should expand the range of products and industrial sectors. The second direction is the range of interaction phases for analysis, as our main study only analysed the quality of interactions between buyer and seller in the pre-inquiry phase (cf. figure 1). As a last direction for further research, more complex interactions such as for example business networks (Cheung/Turnbull, 1995) and not only dyadic buyer-seller should be analysed.

Main contribution

Nevertheless our study can provide valuable insights for an advanced business relationship management. In this context it first of all points out that industrial companies should pay attention – not only to objective factors such as price or product quality – but in particular to their interaction quality, since customers' satisfaction is shown to be a function of both quality aspects. However, in order to optimise interaction quality, innovative measurement techniques are of high relevance. Our transfer of the concept of mystery shopping offers potential new ways for industrial companies to evaluate the buyer-seller interaction quality in a valid manner. A reason for this lies in the fact that industrial marketers may be able to match their interaction behaviour better with the preferences and needs of their buyers. In a next step it then becomes possible to differentiate themselves in an increasingly crowded marketplace.

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