



Customer Relationship Network

Customer Relationship Network, CRN

Customer relations are the central focus of CRN. It's the customer relationship that drives the production of goods and services. The customer relationship forms the basis for how a business is organized. The customer relationship is also the indicator by which success is measured.

The path toward a truly customer-centered enterprise is intersected by many possibilities and problems. It's among these that the most engaging questions for research and development within CRN are to be found.

CRN is a network connecting various areas of science with academia, industry and society, as well as a national, European and international network binding research institutions specializing in this field.

(In this publication we often use words such as, business and customer. The major portion of CRN's activities are also well suited for those public organizations with a vision that includes relations to citizens or clients as the focus of their activity.)

CRN is a research center founded in connection with Mitthögskolan. CRN closely interacts with businesses and other organizations in order to support national and international cooperation with other research interests in this field. The institute has a multi-disciplinary base with tasks in both the social-scientific and technological spheres.

CRN background

Customer interests form the center of every activity. It's the customer for whom goods and services are produced. It is customer demand that determines whether an enterprise prospers or fails. Thus, customer relations are essential to every business endeavor. Much has happened in this field in recent years. Customer relations has become its own area of specialization. Various technical aids are increasingly employed in order to manage customer contacts in a more positive manner. Research is generating new knowledge, which is widely dispersed to more and more people working in this field.

There are many different names for these functions. When referring to free-standing customer-relations companies they are often known as Call Centers or Contact Centers. When referring to internal functions in larger companies the terms generally used are Customer Service, Helpdesk, Support Center or

similar formulations. The term CRM or Customer Relationship Management is typically used as an overall designation embracing all these activities.

Many opinion builders believe that customer relations issues are one of the hottest areas for the future. Activities in the areas of customer care and retention have experienced strong growth during the last decade. This has primarily occurred where industry organizations have cooperated with universities and businesses in various networks (Triple Helix). These developments are also creating other changes. Functionality is becoming increasingly more qualified. This applies to the content of the customer relation, the methodology and the technical supports employed. Together, these changes place growing requirements on research and development. Mitthögskolan assumed an early and strong position in education and research efforts ap-

plying to customer relations. Various course programs have long been available. These address both continuing education for people already active in the workplace as well as special in-depth courses for those in the accounting program.

Mitthögskolan has established a cooperation with Purdue University in the USA, which has a leading international role in the field.

This development comprises yet another step in the establishment of central research in the form of the Customer Relationship Network (CRN). CRN is based in Sundsvall and through Mitthögskolan CRN also has participating nodes in Härnösand, Sveg and Östersund. Active national, European and international research networks are vital for CRN's development. Multi-disciplinary interests in the network include computer science, business economics, informatics, psychology, sociology, statistics and political science.

The central organization's vision includes a large number of potential areas for study and development. The ambition is not that CRN shall drive research and development in all areas. Rather, CRN takes an overall perspective to stimulate projects and generally promote cooperation with other research efforts on the national, European and international levels. Below, are brief descriptions of six on-going areas of research.

Organization

If the customer is to be the center of attention why are so many corporate departments working with customer relations positioned low in the organization and have so little status? What are the organizational consequences for an enterprise when customers actually are prioritized? How can transitional processes be managed well? This area also includes important questions about which customer relations activities can be suitably handled within your organization and which are most suitable for out-sourcing to external suppliers.

Channel integration

Customer relations are handled through many channels. These can include personal meetings, marketing materials, related literature, telephone contact, e-mail, websites, etc. Different organizational departments regard these various channels in differing ways. Certain customer interactions are handled by one's own staff, others by external service providers. How can these dissimilar channels be optimally integrated?

Customer behavior

One of the most engaging long-term issues concerns the consumers of the future. How will customer behaviors be influenced by preferences for specific types of contact channels, forms of payment and similar alternatives? How will preferences change for differing types of goods and services? What varying behaviors among heterogeneous customer groups can be identified?

Benchmarking

Customer services and other specialized customer relations entities need to measure their activities in a way that supports progressive improvement. Assorted measurement tools often capture only quantitative data, which can be important but is seldom sufficient in providing a good basis for change. How can measurement devices evolve and be implemented in a way that allows broad international comparison?

Technical support for customer relations

Technical support is increasingly important for customer relations, yet there are many challenges in this area that remain unsolved. In part, this has to do with the various forms of support needed for one's own personnel in one-to-one customer relations. Another need is how to address the handling of ever more complex customer relations through automation, where requirements for solutions involve both generalized and individual handling of specific customers. Within this area there is a broad spectrum of challenging directions for research and development.

Working environments

Certain specialized customer relations entities have relatively limited and monotonous assignments. Workplaces are often criticized for faults involving working conditions and their social aspects. What are the sources of these problems and how can they be effectively addressed?

ÅRA Åkroken Research Arena

In association with CRN and other research efforts, ÅRA has been established as an arena of interaction between universities, society and businesses. Here, one can practically apply, validate and verify the results of theoretical concepts. This environment encompasses practical development of technical solutions and pilot activities, for example new forms of service production in cooperations between different actors.

Applied research

Developments within CRN are the result of close interaction with the businesses involved and the larger part of the process takes the form of applied research in cooperation with the company. This is important for both partners: researchers gain direct access to real-world analysis subjects and the business partner rapidly gains new knowledge in vital areas.

CRN is supported by many interest groups from the world of business, academia and society at large. Among these are:



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