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**A MODEL  
OF CUSTOMER-ORIENTED  
COMMUNICATION AND  
ITS IMPLEMENTATION  
IN THE TRANSITION  
ECONOMIES**

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# **A MODEL OF CUSTOMER-ORIENTED COMMUNICATION AND ITS IMPLEMENTATION IN THE TRANSITION ECONOMIES**

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## **Abstract**

The former Soviet Bloc countries are faced with the challenge of switching from a command economy to a free market oriented one. Coping with the turbulence of changes largely depends on whether the people involved wish and are able to break with their old attitudes and behaviour. Naturally, the attitudes, knowledge and skills related to the hitherto dominant rules of those societies will influence direct customer communication. In order to train salespeople in the transition economies, we constructed a model of Customer-Oriented Communication (COC). By now this model has been implemented on more than a thousand salespersons in four former socialist countries — Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania, and Russia. The paper describes the COC model, views the training courses conducted, and discusses the evaluation of the training process.

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## Background

Under socialism salespeople had an unusual position — they were given the role of a divider instead of a service-provider. In the conditions of deficiency of everyday products they had to manage dividing products instead of helping their clients to meet their needs. The motivation to work was eroded as the quantity of products to be divided decreased with the deepening crisis of socialism. The reports of trade surveys in the late 1980s revealed that the shortage of products that were in great demand was the primary reason for professional dissatisfaction and weariness of salespeople (Auväärt, 1988). The deficiency of products also appeared to be the main cause of conflicts between retailers and buyers. The protest of buyers was primarily directed to salespeople as the direct representatives of the other side of the buying-selling relationship.

The peak of deficiency was reached in January 1992, which could be described by absolute lack of everyday products. The inhabitants of the former Soviet Union invented numerous ways to improve the effectiveness of the division system and thus alleviate the hardships experienced by consumers. Different rationing coupons were introduced; some to be used nationwide, others only in local areas or even within single enterprises. The latter case can be illustrated by the *Baltika* clothes factory in the capital of Estonia, Tallinn, which implemented its own medium of payment called *reiska* (after the name of the financial manager) to be used in the factory's store.

In Estonia the deficit of consumer goods was rapidly offset after the Monetary Reform in 1992. The amount of products increased and retail outlets entered into competition to regain their customer base. The direction and division of power relationships between retailers and customers in the selling process changed. The situational change led to a discrepancy

between the role perception of salespersons and the role expectations of customers, which became the main cause of problems in the sales interaction process. Although in the fledgling market-economy conditions the role of retailers was shifting from “dividing” to “providing a service”, their attitudes and skills were lagging behind. Thus, they still behaved like dividers.

The situation in Estonian retail trade was unacceptable: as much as 50 thousand employees had to be simultaneously retrained (‘Employed persons...’). From the viewpoint of psychology, training was necessary in order to raise the retailers’ awareness about their roles and the need to change their attitude towards their customers. The same situation was faced by all the former Soviet states.

In the Soviet Union salespeople used to be trained as follows. Moscow stated that a certain shop assistants’ retraining programme had to last for half a year and include 240 hours of theoretical training. One and the same programme was to be applied all over the whole vast territory of the USSR, including, for example, 60 hours of training in expertise of commodities, 40 hours in accounting and inventory check, 20 hours in selling psychology, etc. 20 full hours were allotted to studying ideological topics. Retraining was also part of this system. Shop assistants were required to attend 240-hour off-the-job retraining programmes in every five years. Having successfully completed the course, they used to be promoted to a higher proficiency level. During retraining, the focus was on the salespeople’s knowledge of commodities and skills of operating the cash register.

Entrepreneurs, businessmen and many other people working in trade understood that there was an urgent need to change attitudes towards customers and that there was no time to retrain shop assistants in the way described above. The aim of short-term training programmes was to change the mind of those people who had already started working or wanted to find a job in customer service. The content of the new training pro-

grammes mostly followed the pattern of the long-term ones, the differences being that the ideological aspects were excluded and that the proportions of the topics dealt with were not the same. Apparently, customer service and communication had become more important than they had been before.

The main purpose of our paper is to introduce our Model of Customer-Oriented Communication (COC) and describe its implementation in the transition economies of the former socialist countries. It will illuminate some aspects of the transition process at the level of individuals who are expected to change their attitudes and behavioural patterns. The paper is divided into three main sections. The first section describes the Model of Customer-Oriented Communication and explains the rationale of our training programmes for salespeople. This is followed by discussion of the implementation process of the model on the sample of 85 training groups of salespeople between 1991 and 2000 in Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania, and Russia. The third section deals with the evaluation of the model.

## **1. The Model of Customer-Oriented Communication (COC)**

The changed economic paradigm called for a new, market-oriented model of the sales process. Traditionally, the latter is described in theories as a series of interrelated steps. Different sales process models proposed by Western authors (e.g. Anderson *et al.*, 1992; Churchill, 1990; Donaldson, 1994; Futrell, 1990; Ingram *et al.*, 1997; Mason *et al.*, 1990; Pederson *et al.*, 1988) have pointed out the general principles of the process within the broad context of personal selling. These models mainly discuss the various steps of sales presentation, however, they do not include the interpretation of skills for different stages that was needed in the post-Soviet countries who were only learning about market economy. So, for the transition situation, the western sales models were unsatisfactory.

The post-Soviet countries' primary need was to create a model of everyday sales communication for the conditions of direct retailer-customer interaction in shops as the communication model could provide a useful basis for the salespeople to change their behavioural patterns, which was necessary, given the transformed power relations of the sales interaction. To bridge the existing gap, one of the authors of the present paper, Maaja Vadi, proposed the Model of Customer-Oriented Communication. She had worked as a psychologist in a large Soviet state-owned trade company for eight years. In the former Soviet Union, training and retraining were usually among the psychologists' work obligations and thus this position gave a good opportunity to learn about the salespeople's previous experience. The educational background sets a good starting point for binding together theoretical knowledge of the interpersonal communication process and the issues of a change of attitudes.

The COC Model is based on the process of communication in sales relationships. Interpersonal communication between a salesperson and a customer has been widely discussed as an important part of successful sales interactions. The earlier models have regarded the sales process as one consisting of progressive steps towards the purchase transaction. The COC Model focuses on concrete behavioural instructions, thus allowing the phases of the personal selling process to be analysed separately.

The model considers the sales process as direct two-way communication. Good communication skills acquire the central role in successful sales communication as they help to understand the interaction of factors by which correct communication in the service-process is accomplished. The main avenue to successful sales communication is paved by proficiency in general communication skills. This proficiency can be developed by acquisition and polishing of verbal and non-verbal communication skills together with the perception of their proper choice and timing. The COC model distinguishes between the following three main stages in the process of direct customer communication: the approach, the selling, and the contact closure; it also




indicates how verbal and non-verbal communication should be used in different stages of the process. Besides these two dimensions of sales communication (stages and means), the model also has the third dimension — the evaluation of how pleasant the communication has been — that follows all the stages and use of communication means. This dimension emphasises the subjective character of selling and the sellers’ goal to attain the feeling of pleasure in the customers’ mind during the sales process. Table 1 provides an overview of the model in the form of a matrix presenting the stages of communication in rows and different areas of communication skills in columns. The third dimension — subjective evaluation of how pleasant the communication was — is also added in the table. The use of different means of communication in the main stages will be shortly described in the following sections.

Table 1

**Model of Customer-Oriented Communication (COC)**

Means of communication	Non-verbal means of communication (n)	Verbal means of communication (v)	Information (i)
Stages of communication			
1. Approach (A)	1n	1v	–
2. Selling (S)	2n	2v	2i
3. Contact closure (C)	3n	3v	–

 Evaluation of how pleasant the communication was (E)

*In — Use of the non-verbal means of communication at the stage of Approach.* The non-verbal means of communication connect the switch from the sellers’ inner speech with the approach stage. The main goal of the seller’s body language here is to indicate his/her readiness to provide a service. The whole activity has a symbolic rather than concrete character. From the clients’ point of view, the switch from dealing with

goods to the approach stage should be smooth, because a sudden change in activity might cause the feeling of discomfort. The salespeople need to perceive when it is proper to approach the customer as this enables them to achieve the best results in the sales process.

*1v — Use of the verbal means of communication at the Approach stage.* The verbal means of communication set the basis for selling. Salespeople can use four different approaches: to offer the service (the service approach), ask direct or indirect questions (the question approach), or to present the products (the merchandise approach) (Futrell, 1990). For a good contact, the verbal approach to customers also needs to be in time. The verbal part in the approach stage creates inconvenience in many sellers. Salespersons' ability to make contact can be developed by visual training in which the selling activities and looking at them from aside will help to find the right moment for making contact with the customers.

*2n — Use of non-verbal means of communication at the stage of Selling.* The stage of selling involves determining the client's needs and wishes, demonstration of products and recommendation of potential solutions. The non-verbal means of communication enable the seller to turn the products closer to the buyers, shaping emotional attitudes and transmitting information. During the presentation of products there is a danger that new products are added for inspection too quickly, but the undue hurrying may disturb the rhythm of selling. The seller has to show that he/she is listening to the buyer (mainly by eye contact, movement of the head, body posture, and facial expression).

*2v — Use of the verbal means of communication at the stage of Selling.* Information about the products and services is mainly transmitted by the verbal means. The influence develops from the comprehensiveness of arguments, the choice of words and the style of speech. The verbal means of communication also dominate in situations where the use of the non-verbal channel is inhibited for some reason, or in cases when there is a danger

of staining or breaking the items. One of the most difficult problems in the sales process is to establish a good rapport with customers. Sellers can gain more self-confidence in their behaviour if there is consensus in the shop about the techniques of providing information to customers in particular situations — e.g. whether to direct customers to other shops in case the item sought is out of stock. While giving additional information and thus decreasing the customers' problems can be considered as a service, the immediate referral of a customer to the competitors may tarnish the shop's image.

*2i — Providing information at the stage of Selling.* To forge enduring relationships both the seller and the buyer should gain from the purchase. The information given at the stage of selling discloses the customer value of the item that can be expressed as an idea about the particular good. Sellers need to determine the buyers' needs and connect them with what they supply, informing their customers about the features, advantages and benefits of goods. The benefits of products indicate what a particular client can gain from consuming the product and what kind of needs the product meets.

*3n — Use of the non-verbal means of communication at the stage of Contact Closure.* The non-verbal communication at the stage of contact closure guarantees the arrangement of payment, gives positive feedback to customers and indicates the seller's willingness to be of service in the future. Customers can start displaying signs of contact closure, such as long pauses in speech, increase in the spatial distance with the salesperson, or expressing less interest in additional offers. On the non-verbal communication level, the salesperson's body posture should indicate the attitude of readiness to serve like at the stage of approach. It should embed in the customers' minds the feeling about the salespersons' willingness to be of service in the future as well.

*3v — Use of the verbal means of communication at the stage of Contact Closure.* While wrapping up the item, the seller can also use the verbal means of communication for giving additio-

nal information about the commodity or reassuring the customers that their choice was good. Even if the customer did not make a purchase, the positive tone of communication should be sustained — e.g. the customer is asked to call again.

*Evaluation of how pleasant the communication was.* Whether the selling process is pleasant or not depends on the interaction of the means of communication and the transmitted information. Comparing the roles of the customer and the salesperson, we have to emphasise that the role of salespeople is more structured, which gives them more advantages in many aspects of the co-activities. Salespeople have greater opportunities to influence the final result and satisfaction from the communication process. Service is perceived as pleasant if it lives up to the consumers' needs and expectations.

The non-verbal means of communication are more important regarding the development of pleasantness at the stages of approach and contact closure. Whether the contact is pleasant or not depends on the seller's appropriate and tidy appearance. Kind facial expressions, eye contact that creates confidence, and gestures that indicate willingness to serve will make a good impression of the service and of the shop in general.

The verbal means of communication have a greater role to play in making the contact pleasant in the stage of selling. Clients appreciate the kind tone of speech and the use of easily comprehensible vocabulary. Words can help to appraise the purchase at the stage of contact closure. The use of polite expressions is important also in unpleasant situations.

The customers' ability to accept information is limited; therefore they like to receive only necessary information. Good knowledge of the customers and anticipating their needs will help the sellers to choose necessary information.

Successful communication presumes that the salesperson should be orientated to the customer and have proper attitudes. The attitude construct is defined as "a mental and neural state of readiness, organised through experience, exerting a directive or dynamic influence upon the individual's response to all objects

and situations with which it is related” (Allport, 1935). Though there are inconsistent viewpoints among researchers about the components of attitudes, major popularity has been gained by the three-component view suggesting that attitudes consist of three classes of response (cognitive, affective and behavioural) to a stimulus or object (Bagozzi and Burnkrant, 1979).

Triandis explains that an attitude is an idea charged with emotion which predisposes a class of actions to a particular class of social situations and argues that by this definition the attitudes have three components (Triandis, 1971). The cognitive component is what we know about an object, the affective is how we feel about it and the behavioural (or conative) is about how we plan to act on our knowledge and feelings.

In the sales communication process the salespeople should have knowledge about their customers and their needs (the cognitive component of attitude); they should value their customers and wish to make the communication process pleasant for them (the affective component of attitude). They should also know the particular communication techniques to build relationships with customers and create value for them (the behavioural component of attitude). The cognitive aspect puts considerable impact on the attitudes and behaviour formation (*i.e.* Shaver, 1987). Therefore, the model described above can serve as a basis for a training programme. It can also serve as a visual aid for training programmes, because the COC Model has an appropriate number of elements that make it easy to memorise and apt for simultaneous perception.

## **2. Implementation of the COC Model in sales training**

The COC Model has been part of many salespeoples’ training programmes since late 1991 and the frequency of its use has been increasing rapidly in the subsequent years. The training programmes are short, lasting approximately one week, or 40–50 hours. Here *short* is used in order to indicate the difference

between the new training programmes and those characteristic in the period of a command economy when various combinations of on-the-job and off-the-job training modes were used in Estonia. On-the-job training means that the employee is placed into a real work situation and is familiarised with his/her job by an experienced employee or supervisor, while off-the-job training, whether it is done in organisations, classrooms, vocational schools, or elsewhere.

### **Participants in the training programmes**

The present paper explores implementation of the COC model on the sample of 85 training groups in the period 1991–2000. Consequently, more than one thousand salespersons participated in these training programmes that were arranged to shape the patterns of sales communication. Maaja Vadi conducted the training sessions. Many groups were composed of the employees of one company.

The most solid cooperation was accomplished with *Baltman* — the chain of stores established in 1991 at the Estonian manufacturing company *Baltika*. The target group of *Baltman* includes gentlemen who prefer classical high-quality clothing. *Baltman's* products are marketed in Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania, the Ukraine, Poland, Sweden, Finland, Norway, Denmark, Poland, Germany, Great Britain and the USA ('Baltika Grupp...'). *Baltman* has grown very fast and has opened several new shops every year.

The training programmes in *Baltman* were started in December 1991, and 3–7 training groups were taught every year until 1999. Some groups consisted of salespeople who were selling well-known brands. For example, the employees of *JalaJälg*, the official distributor of *Nike* products, participated in the training programmes twice in 1999. The salespeople dealing in the British brand *NEXT* were trained in 1994, 1995, 1997, and the employees of the *SPAR* supermarket chain also participated in 1995 and 1997. These are but a few examples of the training

sessions where the COC Model was applied as the framework for shaping the salespersons' customer orientation and communication skills.

In terms of group structure, there were two types of groups in our sample. Some groups incorporated salespersons from recently formed entities, whereas others consisted of employees who had been working together for a relatively long time. Indeed, they had common and shared attitudes towards customers and their communicating habits were shaped by Soviet-type trading traditions. The "novice groups" were put together in accordance with the principles and techniques of personnel selection. They demonstrated a radically changed understanding of the human resources management compared to the salespersons with long seniority, who were used to the Russian term "kadrovaja rabota" (operating the cadres). This term was a brainchild of the Soviet system and implies the military domain, thus illustrating the underlying philosophy of the Soviet economic system and the prevailing attitude towards recruitment. It was based on instructions from the top; subjective criteria used to have an important role in personnel selection.

The formation of the "novice groups" started by advertising in newspapers, followed by filling in the application form, writing reference lists, taking aptitude tests and interviews that led to recruitment of the participants in our sample. This procedure was used in all cases of recruitment by *Baltman* in Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania. Russia was the only exception where different paths of selections were followed. In February 1996 the recruitment of sales personnel in Moscow was still strictly subject to the decision taken by the management of the GUM department store (*Baltman*'s partner in Russia), whose criteria of choice remained undisclosed, on the one hand, the selection procedure mentioned above was successfully completed in Yekaterinburg (Russia) in September 1997, on the other.

Usually plenty of people applied for selling positions, partly due to the expectation that new enterprises would be able to survive in the society undergoing reforms. However, the

transition also generated unemployment because many old enterprises simply went out of business.

## **The Framework of the COC Model in Sales Training**

The sales training sessions consisted of three main parts:

- overview of the sales process — understanding the salespersons' role and customers' expectations;
- introduction of the COC Model — understanding the flow of the sales communication process and means of communication;
- training the skills and patterns of behaviour needed to exploit the COC Model.

This section describes the first two theoretical parts of the training sessions that consisted of lectures and group discussions. The structure of the training sessions is schematically shown in Figure 1. The following section will introduce the third — role-play session — that was used to develop the necessary skills for implementing the (knowledge of the) COC Model.

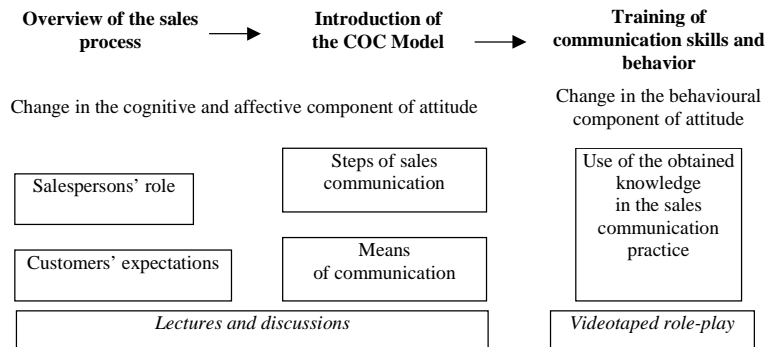


Figure 1. The structure of the sales training sessions based on the COC Model



Often there was a gap between these two aspects of the role, which helped the participants to understand the importance of defining their customers' expectations. It was very rarely that customers' satisfaction occurred in the role perception of participants — it was mentioned only in five training groups out of 85. Likewise the participants very seldom emphasised cleanliness, honesty, accuracy and setting the pace of direct communication. On the other hand, they often pointed out these aspects when the role expectations were under consideration. The role framework enabled us also to discuss the actual role behaviour and role conflicts.

Lectures and debates on different aspects of sales communication were followed by role clarification activities. The table describing the model (Table 1) was handed out to the participants and the trainer then explained the principles of using different means of communication. Naturally, not all the members of the training groups accepted the suggestions for more efficient communication. For example, the trainer and the participants often held heated debates about the first stage of communication. The salespersons objected the suggestion to start a conversation with customers. They rather preferred passive modes of communication, drawing their arguments from their past experience. It had not been customary to initiate a conversation with customers in the conditions where goods had to be divided rather than sold and were anyway in short supply. With the changing situation both salespeople and customers felt certain discomfort, particularly with regard to relaxed communication. Most groups refused to take the advice to start verbal communication with a greeting. But this variance of opinions provided a trigger for encouraging the salespersons to pay attention to their customer's readiness in making the initial contact in the changed situation.

Another target in the debates was the affirmative style of communication. The salespersons tended to say "no" when they could not offer precisely this commodity that the customer was asking for or when they lacked proper information about the qualities of certain goods, etc. Prior to the training process, the

importance of customers' needs was explained. Training the affirmative communication style enabled the participants' attention to be focussed on the analysis of how varying qualities of goods can meet customers' needs.

Some unconscious presumptions about customers' needs raised difficulties for those salespeople who came from the era of deficiency. The limited amount of goods, and the uniformity of supply and selection also induced their thinking about the uniformity of demand. They looked at the customers' needs from a very personal and quite narrow perspective and were keen to say "we don't have the item you are looking for" rather than to interpret the customers' wishes and to suggest offers on the basis of the goods available. Most of them believed that there were only two possible answers — "no" and "yes" — to be given to customers. Discussions revealed that the participants considered these answers to be attributes of honest statements. As a result, a paradoxical situation emerged: many of those salespeople were well trained for dealing in the particular merchandise at hand, yet they were unable to see connections between different qualities of goods and their customers' needs.

The communication during payment appeared as a problematic issue in several training groups at the stage of contact completion. The salespersons were influenced by the underlying preference to communicate with customers as little as possible and argued against the requirement to properly enunciate the formalities of payment for goods, such as the price payable as well as the amount of change and the need to keep the receipt as proof of purchase. They thought that it might frighten the customers if the shop assistant suddenly started to talk to them.

### **Elaboration of Skills and Patterns of Behaviour of Salespeople in Accordance with the COC Model**

The videotaped role-play method was used to develop the necessary skills for implementing the knowledge of the COC

Model. The videotaped episodes allowed us to analyse the effects of verbal and non-verbal communication. The starting point of the discussions was often the potential eventual outcome (purchase or other issues) of the customers' visit to the shop and the focus was set on the means of communication which contributed to or counteracted this outcome. The participants worked in small groups of 10–14 members, focussing on different problems and enacting different roles during a two- to three-day course.

Most groups dealt with four major topics during the training course:

- elaboration of the means of non-verbal communication;
- direct communication process in the case of two salespersons servicing a single customer;
- direct communication process between a salesperson and one customer, and
- direct communication process between a salesperson and two customers.

The practice of every topic consisted of video-training and different psychotechnical exercises that bound the separate sessions into a whole. Here “psychotechnical” means practical application of psychological principles to the control and management of behaviour. It enabled us to train the art of being in the centre of others' attention, in order to perceive others' characteristics and focus on their principles of interpersonal communication. For example, all the group members were focal persons once when the game of compliments was played. Everybody was asked to discern the focal person's pleasant attribute or quality and express it properly. The task was sometimes difficult for both the sender and receiver. But these exercises reduced tension in many cases when role players failed to gain the result and only acquired a broader perception from the perspective of learning.

Non-verbal communication was the focus of work after the opening session of the video-training. The participants played the roles of customers and salespersons, using only non-verbal

communication. They looked as mute and usually sold and bought some imaginary commodities, such as ten yellow buttons, a blue scarf, etc. Every single case was followed by discussion which revealed the functions of the non-verbal means used. In order to give the participants' time for adaptation with the group and the situation, the cases were not videotaped in this session.

The key words of the second session were the skills of recommending different goods and cooperation between salespeople. Two persons took on the salespeople's roles and tried to explain to customers the qualities of the goods which were picked from among the available variety of goods on sale. Each customer's typical wish was tied with the need to find a present for somebody and the cases became more complicated in the long run. In this and the following sessions videotaped feedback was used.

The third session was the most difficult one because of the intensity of role clarification. The customers had very different intentions when entering the shop. For example, they could have an idea to merely collect information as a competitor or a journalist, to express their bad mood, to shoplift, etc. The salesperson's task was to behave properly in their role and use every opportunity to offer goods that were on sale. These cases confirmed that selling techniques are very useful tools in stressful situations — the trainees managed to "sell" some goods only if they could use proper body language and verbal expressions.

The last session often created a convivial atmosphere within the group. The participants were asked to role-play customers and salespersons in pairs, meeting each other's needs. The members of the group had by then acquired several skills and started to display very different combinations of the customers' role. Mother with child, teenagers with their friends, bosses and their secretaries, married couples — these were a few examples of the roles that were in the focus of this session. The exploitation of different cases served to confirm the idea that those customers' needs, demands, and behavior patterns vary to a great

degree and salespeople have to recognize what the customers want and wish.

The typical last case of the video-training was often entirely opposite to the previous ones. The role-players of shop assistants were quietly requested to do everything not in compliance with the character of their role. Usually, at the beginning of the role-play the members of the group did not understand what was going on and were confused. But as soon as the devotional role behaviour occurred, they immediately realised what their customers would be feeling when the devotional role behavior occurred.

### **3. Evaluation of the model and conclusions**

Hood, Vahlane and Kilis explain the meaning of the transition in the introduction of the book "Transition in the Baltic States. Micro-Level Studies": 'Transition' has become a key word in contemporary thinking about the series of complex changes taking place in the post-socialist world. --- Emerging market mechanisms increasingly pervade the economy and society, and it is time to carefully consider how economic actors and social groups not just adapt to a new economic environment, but also struggle to form the new rules of the game (Hood *et al.*, 1997, p. 1). Customer communication is a sensitive affair at both the interpersonal and societal levels. Society forms the framework of attitudes and relationships between customers and servicing people. The economic conditions in the Soviet Bloc countries shaped a type of customer communication, which reflected the rules of economic deficiency.

The change of society created an urgent need for a new pattern of behavior in the service area, including the salesperson-customer communication. The COC Model was a tool for the evolution of a new understanding and skills to meet the requirements of the market economy. More than one thousand

salespersons have taken similar courses in several post-socialist countries.

The courses were evaluated in different dimensions and by different people. Companies expressed positive opinions about the effectiveness of the training and the gained level of employees' motivation. They also gave feedback if participating in the training programmes recurrently. Most of these companies are successful and have adjusted well to the market economy. For example, the *Baltman* stores were the subsidiaries of the leading Estonian company *Baltika* and belonged to the list of the Estonian TOP 10 several times. *Baltman's* salespeople earned praise for their good job. They were considered to be the best when the local radio station in the capital city of Estonia, Tallinn, surveyed customers' opinions to find the shop with the best level of customer communication in the city at the beginning of 1996. Ülle Sõstra conducted a survey about *Baltman*, studying the influence of *Baltman's* strategy on its customers in Estonia, concluding that the friendly and helpful behaviour of salespersons was an important aspect of the positive attitude towards the brand mark of *Baltman* (Sõstra, 1996).

The salespeople representing the official distributor of *Nike* participated in the training course where the COC Model was introduced in 1999. They kept a record of their training process, evaluating its results from their personal perspective. The participants of the training groups, however, had different opinions. It also happened that some members of the training groups were dissatisfied with the training process or preferred to be passive. Four main reasons could be pointed out:

- Some participants had a low level of motivation to work in the group or for some reason disliked being videotaped;
- They had poor experience of working in small groups;
- Recalls of the group were associated with some antagonistic relationships;
- The trainer was unable to deal with the participants' frustration.

Lack of motivation or inherent opposition influenced some participants. These were mostly members of retraining groups. Their instructor paid less attention to the reasons of resistance and insisted on attending the course. For example, one young man refused to participate in the video training but his boss coerced him to attend the course. This shop assistant was passive all the time, looked at the others' activities and in the long run agreed to participate only in the last exercise, taking on the role of a non-service-oriented salesperson.

Some group members had poor skills for working in small groups, especially in the training groups. These participants would disrupt the activities of the whole group. Intruders whose chatting disturbed group work and violated the rule of disclosing one's opinion were the most frequent problem. Inaptitude of being either in the positive or negative focus disturbs both training and learning.

The process of intensive study might have evoked the ill feeling that existed already due to the past experience of the intragroup behaviour and organisational culture. Sometimes some people's hostile attitude toward a colleague led to taking revenge. One of the role players performed a very complicated case because she/he intended to push the other person into trouble.

Instant feedback is a special feature of role-playing and video training. It leads to the expected results but also includes the risk of having a participant fail to accomplish the task on several occasions. The trainer's ability and competency are needed to notice these signs and resolve the situation. The intensive learning process is always linked to intrapersonal reassessment of attitudes and knowledge and sometimes people may lose their emotional balance. This implies the most ethical and vulnerable issue of this training method. The trainer's shortcomings, such as a superficial style of work and other insufficiencies can partly account for failure. Even a well-prepared and competent instructor may encounter problems in communication training.

In the Estonian society, the change of attitudes took place in all spheres. For example, the staff of a reformatory school changed their attitudes towards their inmates and formed a new understanding about the inmates' needs in the transition society (Strömpl, 2000). We also underline this aspect. The COC Model was directed toward the cognitive component of attitudes because it presented the idea of sales communication. Aspiration and feelings were addressed to the affective component that involves emotions that change the idea. The opposite pole of emotions (i.e. fear, frustration, and confusion) also sets its impact on this component. The videotaped role-play created a predisposition to action according to the new attitude or, in other words, modified the behavioural component.

To sum up, first it should be mentioned that group formation played a crucial role in several cases. Those applicants who passed the careful selection process were much more active and enthusiastic in training compared to the members of the retraining groups ("old groups"). Indeed, the perceived success created aspirations in the participants' minds and positively touched their self-esteem. The salespersons who had work experience from the command economy were better motivated in "new groups".

Second, commonly shared attitudes, values, beliefs, and behavioural patterns were under consideration within the training courses. These activities formed the organisational culture, which covers intangible issues when people participate in organisations. Organisational culture is seen as an important aspect of formation of customer service orientation in several respects (for example, Wilson, 2001; Homburg & Pflesser, 2000; Boyle, 1997; Langan-Fox & Tan, 1997). It is one of the key questions at the organisational level in the transition countries. Meyer & Møller (1999) claim that local organisational culture, which evolved under socialism, inhibited strategic change in the companies with Eastern Germanic background, while Fey & Nordahl (1999), focussing on the positive aspect, have verified that it was a certain type of organisational culture that guided some Russian companies to successful performance. Therefore,



the possibility to design and develop customer-oriented organisational culture could be one of the outcomes of our training programmes.

In the mid-1990s the training programme also evolved new topics, especially for the retraining groups, which consisted of *Baltman* employees. For example, focus was set on language skills. Hundred-word vocabularies comprising expressions used in interpersonal communication and terms of clothing were composed in English, German, Russian and Finnish. The salespeople acquired these vocabularies in two languages and subsequently used this knowledge in the role-play. Lots of foreigners visit *Baltman*'s stores; thus the training of language skills helped facilitate communication with these customers.

The binding of the COC Model to the training programmes has been used in Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania, and Russia during almost a decade, resembling the transition that has been in process in these countries. The training provides a vivid example of changes taking place in these countries.

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## KOKKUVÕTE

### **Kliendikeskse müügisuhtluse mudel ja selle rakendamine siirdemajanduses**

Endise Ida-bloki riikidele sai osaks väljakutse kujundada oma käsumajandusel toimiv majandussüsteem ümber turule orienteeritud majanduseks. Sellest tulenenud tormiliste muutustega toimetulek sõltus suuresti inimeste soovist ja võimest loobuda oma varasematest hoiakutest ja käitumisviisidest. Hoiakute, teadmiste ja oskustega seotud reeglid, mis siiani olid neis ühiskondades domineerinud, mõjutasid ka vahetut müügisuhtlust kaubanduses. Muutunud kliendisuhte olemus põhjustas muutuse ka müüja rollis — endise kaupade jagaja rolli asemel tuli omandada uus — teenindaja roll. Muutunud paradigma tingimustes vajati uut, turule orienteeritud müügirotsessi mudelit. Teoreetilistes käsitlustes kirjeldatakse müügirotsessi traditsiooniliselt kui omavahel seotud üksiketappide jada. Kuigi Lääne-Euroopa ja Ameerika teaduskirjanduses on avaldatud mitmeid müügirotsessi mudeleid, mis toovad välja protsessi üldised printsiibid isikliku müügi laiemas kontekstis, ei sisalda need erinevate üksiketappide täpsemat tõlgendust oskuste tasandil, mida vajaksid alles turumajanduse põhimõtteid õppivad endised Ida-bloki riigid. Seetõttu olid Lääne kaubandusmudelid siirdemajanduse tingimustes ebapiisavad.

Tekkinud lünga täitmiseks koostas üks käesoleva artikli autoritest *Kliendikeskse müügisuhtluse mudeli*, mis käsitles igapäevast vahetut ostja–müüja suhtlust kauplustes. Mudel lähtus samuti müügirotsessi üksiketappidest, kuid selles toodi detailselt välja konkreetsed käitumisjuhised ja vajalikud oskused etappide lõikes. Mudelit kasutati aastatel 1991–2000 müügikoolitusprogrammides enam kui 1000 müügitöötajast koosnenud valimis neljas endises sotsialismiriigis — Eestis, Lätis, Leedus ja Vene-

maal. Artiklis tutvustatakse mudelit ning analüüsitakse ja hinnatakse selle rakendamist kaubandustöötajate praktilises väljajätkes siirdemajanduse tingimustes. Mudel võimaldab muuta kaubandustöötajate hoiakuid ning seeläbi avaldab mõju ettevõtete kliendikesksuse kujundamisele.