

# **Interface Management and Relationship Marketing: An Exploratory Analysis of Complex Exchange Systems within Service Activities**

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Definitions of service are numerous, fragmented and inevitably imperfect. Service is simultaneously a process, a social interaction, a relation and an intangible result. In the framework of service activities, there is no clear division between production and exchange, no clear distinction between process and result.

However, whatever the accepted definition, service is primarily defined as a complex system of interfaces and exchanges and many authors have stressed the nature and characteristics of the relations which link companies with their clients.

Nevertheless, research in this field has, until now, mostly favoured a "binary" analysis of the exchange; examining helpfully and in-depth the processes of interaction between the service provider company, through its contact personnel, and the clients of the firm.

The aim of this exploratory research is to offer readers several useful paths of thought on a "widened" approach to the notion of interface, taking into account several types of agent in the exchange, parties involved in the process of fulfilment of the provision of service and in its result.

Due to the multiplicity and complexity of the ties which connect them to the service provider or to clients, the management of these agents is often difficult. However, we demonstrate that a well carried out analysis of these involved parties and ties constitutes a major source of innovation and differentiation on the market of intangibles.

Four case studies are developed and organized around two dimensions which seem essential in interface management and take into account a strictly relational element on the one hand and a symbolic and cultural element on the other.

In doing this, our purpose is to further thought and approaches related to interface management and relationship marketing in the service industry. Indeed, it seems important that each agent, who directly or indirectly influences the running of the process and the carrying out of the service, should be taken into consideration.

This "extensive" view of service relations allows us to enrich the relational perspective, a major paradigm of marketing and management, by furthering it through a strongly cultural and much more "collective" approach.