

Complementing Self-Serve Technology with Service Relationships: The Customer Perspective

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ABSTRACT

The adoption of self-service technology (SST) by customers is arguably the hallmark of a successful dot-com venture. The more customers go online to fulfill their service needs themselves, the more scalable and cost-effective the business model. However, in the business-to-business environment, embedded relationships between customers and providers (e.g., sales representatives) have traditionally been key in generating repeat business and financial success (Anderson et al., 1994). This raises questions about the impact of using SSTs to complement service relationships, a strategy that an increasing number of firms is employing.

This research relies on qualitative research methods, particularly interviews, to explore what factors determine the mode of service interaction (SST, representative, or a combination of the two) customers choose. Conceptualizing relationship-SST complementarity as a continuum with customers' exclusive use of service relationships as one pole and their exclusive use of SST as the other, this research examines the factors that impact how customers pick their location along this continuum. Understanding the reasons underlying the customers' mode of interacting with the firm helps service organizations determine the optimal zone along the relationship-SST continuum and ways of moving their customers to such a location.

Keywords: self-service technology, service relationships, customer interaction, qualitative research, service delivery.