

Business-to-business customers expect personal service in online chat

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For a long time, companies have used cost-effective chat services in their business-to-customer (B2C) sales. Companies engaged in business-to-business (B2B) sales are also increasingly moving their activities

online, but their online chat services and customer interaction have not been studied much yet. A new study from the University of Eastern Finland shows that the nature of social presence in B2B online chat dialogues varied depending on the stage of the customer relationship.

Published in *European Journal of Marketing*, the study explored social presence in a B2B online chat service. In technology-mediated communication, social presence refers to a feeling of interaction with a real, authentic person. The data was collected at a case company specialising in SaaS services, and it comprised 157 chat dialogues between buyers and sellers.

"A lack of social presence can be one reason why a company's online sales aren't growing. Many companies want to invest in elements that ooze social presence, since anonymous, asynchronous and text-based technology-mediated communication can reduce the creation of trust between the parties," University Lecturer Jonna Koponen from the University of Eastern Finland notes.

New customers are looking for solutions to their business problems, existing customers maintain their [customer](#) relationship

The study showed that the behaviour and goals of customers in online chat dialogues varied depending on the stage of the customer relationship. New customers and potential buyers were looking for solutions to their business problems, asked for more information on SaaS services or gave feedback to the company. In a best-case scenario, they had decided to purchase the service or wanted to continue their dialogue with the company's solution sales representative in another communication channel.

The company's long-term customers, on the other hand, used the chat service for obtaining information, solving problems, giving feedback and

booking appointments with the company's solution sales representative. They also used the chat service to maintain the customer relationship. Sometimes they even brought in new customers by recommending the [company](#) to others.

"Social presence plays a key role in e-commerce. Earlier studies have shown that [social presence](#) increases the customer's trust in the website and in the seller, and it also provides support for the customer's decision to purchase," Koponen says.

The study is the first to show how an online chat service can help to build customer relationships in B2B e-commerce. The chat [service](#) was also one of the channels B2B customers used for making complaints. The findings of the study can be used in the development of [chat](#) bots, in sales and marketing training, as well as in the development of companies' e-commerce.

More information: Jonna Pauliina Koponen et al, Social presence and e-commerce B2B chat functions, *European Journal of Marketing* (2020). [DOI: 10.1108/EJM-01-2019-0061](https://doi.org/10.1108/EJM-01-2019-0061)

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