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Alexandre Mallard

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‘You are a *Star customer*, please hold the line...’

CRM and the sociotechnical inscriptions of market attachment

Alexandre Mallard

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Introduction

That market exchange involves some sort of attachment between the stakeholders involved in transactions has given rise to controversial discussions among scholars of economic practices.¹ While early political economy implied the idea that market exchange would promote the development of peaceful relationships between people – see the influence of the *doux commerce* thesis in the writings of eighteenth-century philosophers, from Montesquieu to Hume to Smith (Hirschman, 1982) – neoclassical economics has been inclined to prescribe the complete absence of social bonds for the smooth running of transactions and the achievement of market equilibrium. Sociologists have variously observed this belief within modern economic thought (Fourcade and Healy, 2007), with one of the ambitions being to develop a conception of market attachment that goes beyond the way personal relationships are configured. Indeed, sociology has traditionally considered market relations through notions such as the ‘social tie’ and ‘embeddedness’ but many relational configurations in the economy cannot be solely described using these analytical tools (Cochoy, this volume). The infrastructures and processes implemented by companies to organise, automate and rationalise their relations with clients obviously constitute a domain of interest from this perspective: the very fact that there exists a professional area of expertise and a set of technical tools devoted to ‘Customer Relationship Management’ (CRM) should attract the curiosity of sociologists studying market attachments. In this chapter, I propose to investigate the modalities of market attachment involved in CRM, drawing on an analysis of its implementation in the particular context of a call centre.

¹ I want to thank Joe Deville and Liz McFall for their suggestions on the writing of this chapter and for their help in the correction of the English. I also want to thank Antoine Hennion for a vivid discussion concerning the risks of a reckless use of the notion of attachment to describe market relations. All mistakes remaining in the text are mine.

I will pursue two objectives here. The first is to examine the sociotechnical and organisational resources involved in the construction of market attachments. In the contemporary world, market relationships can take many different forms (Cochoy, 2012): just compare the relation between a household and a service provider (for instance for the provision of gas or electricity), between a user and a brand, between a consumer and a techno-organisational infrastructure of distribution like a supermarket. As soon as one focuses on market relationships beyond the interpersonal context *per se*, there is a vast and heterogeneous array of entities to take into account. I will consider attachment as the dynamic process – the process of ‘attaching’ – through which the sociotechnical and organisational entities supporting this kind of relationship emerge.

The second objective is to develop an analysis of market attachment that takes into account its ambivalent character. There are many different ways to be attached in the market – many different ways in which ‘the market will have us’, to echo Liz McFall and Joe Deville (this volume). Let me dichotomise things for the sake of simplicity. One can be attached in the sense of being bound, trussed-up or chained, e.g. unwillingly held back in a relationship that is imposed by contingent circumstances or by the power relations of a given situation. An entrepreneur may thus be attached to a service provider on whom he is dependent. But one can also be attached in the sense of being voluntarily involved in a relationship characterised by its singularity, its inscription in time along a shared history, its active character and its associated production of values (Hennion, 2007, 2015). A consumer may be attached to the corner shop because the opening hours, the products offered and the proximity enable easy shopping for dinner when coming back from work late at night: the regularity of the practice, the convenience of circumstances, the irreducibility of proximity, all contribute to this singular attachment. In this chapter, I propose the hypothesis that this opposition between, on the one hand, an *instrumental* conception of the relationship and, on the other hand, a conception that insists on its *active and open-ended* character, is a fruitful way to characterise the ambivalence of market attachments and to explore their expressions in various situations.

For the pursuit of both objectives, the case of call centres is a radical one. Call centres occupy a significant place in contemporary consumption: we use them to buy train tickets, to set up car insurance contracts, to handle telephone services and so forth. As compared with other contexts of market exchange (the interaction with a corner shop merchant, in a supermarket, etc.) the relationship that takes place in a call centre interaction has an extreme configuration: it is highly anonymous (the consumer never or rarely speaks twice to the same person), highly mediated by technology (communication networks and information systems intervene in the relationship) and conspicuously rationalised (one usually feels that the dialogue with a call centre operator is heavily framed by time constraints). The complaints of consumers who have had a bad experience with call centres illustrate the vicissitudes of a relationship that is marked by technical intricacies, organisational constraints and commercial cunning. They refer to Interactive Voice Response (IVR)² systems, those user unfriendly automated voice server systems,

² An IVR system is an automatic device managing all the operations presented to the customer calling a call centre: a recorded or synthetic voice provides a series of messages explaining the content of the service, the customer is invited to press specific keys on the phone to access given services, music is offered while the caller is on hold, the call is automatically routed to given service, etc.

the endless waiting times while listening to haunting music on hold before talking to the right person, an impersonal touch in the dialogue with employees reading pre-written scripts. Very few of these consumers would consider that there is any human feeling in the call centre employee's discussion. The attachment at stake here, if any, clearly looks instrumental.

Yet professionals of call centre design and management make substantial efforts to improve the quality of customer service, drawing notably on CRM tools. My contention is that the study of these efforts offers a fruitful opportunity for exploring the dynamics of market attachment in all its dimensions: not, or not only, as an intention to increase the degree of instrumental constraint on the customer, but also as an attempt to open up a space for the production of active relationships. In order to flesh out this idea, I will outline the case of a project that I had the chance to follow, involving the reorganisation of call centre units in a large company which aimed to implement a system of differentiation in its customer service provision. I will show that the complex techno-organisational work that took place during this reorganisation supported a rich and plural conception of the market relationship. This approach suggests that one of the issues at stake in the construction of market attachment is the articulation and adjustment of the various relational dimensions involved, in the organisational realm and in the associated sociotechnical processes.

A CRM system to implement customer differentiation in call centres

The 'Star Customer' project

At the beginning of the 2000s, the French telecommunication operator 'Global Telecom'³ – abbreviated as 'GT' – considered implementing commercial differentiation in the customer service provided by its call centres. As a large international organisation employing more than 200,000 people in France and other countries, GT relied extensively on call centres for its commercial activities. In 2001, it launched a project named 'Star Customer', whose main purpose⁴ was to offer a type of customer service that would differ according to the consumers' attitude towards the company: the idea was, for instance, to reward those customers who were the most faithful to the company, to grant extra attention and energy to those who consumed the highest amount of services, etc. In an era of market development where the loyalty of customers was an ever greater area of concern, the question of their attachment to the company appeared important, and customer differentiation was seen as a way to develop customer relationships in order to counter the rise of 'unfaithful' behaviours.

The Star Customer project – which I will call the 'SC project' for the sake of

³ All names of companies, projects, places and people used in this chapter are pseudonyms.

⁴ Another explicit purpose of the project was to federate and homogenise the customer relationship carried out by the different services and subsidiaries of GT. This secondary purpose was slightly less important, and in spite of its potential interest, I won't examine this aspect in the present text.

simplicity – had a great deal of scope within GT. It concerned call centres providing services for all the mobile phone, fixed phone and internet product lines sold by the group. Customers would use these call centres for routine service operations such as subscribing to new mobile packages, getting information about the price of an internet service, cancelling a landline contract, etc. Although it focused only on the activities of call centres, the project touched upon a variety of marketing, commercial and organisational issues at stake in CRM. These ranged from the definition of characteristics of consumers, to the organisation of call centres, to the staging of differentiated commercial interaction scenarios, to the management of phone operators, etc. Designed as a large-scale experiment, it required the implementation of specific organisational and technical devices in a dozen or so call centre units, and envisioned a possible generalisation of the system across the whole group. A large number of actors inside and outside the company were mobilised in the analysis and experimentation associated with the SC project. I was engaged in this collective work, being commissioned to a consultancy project intended to provide the project managers with insights on the so-called ‘sociological dimension’ of the implementation process. This quite loose mission statement gave me the opportunity to carry out a survey in cooperation with two sociological colleagues, Valérie Beaudouin and Christine Guilbert. We conducted qualitative interviews with phone operators, managers, marketers and engineers working in the eight call centre units involved in the project, and analysed phone interactions between operators and clients.⁵

The SC project intended to bring changes in the call centres that were typical of the evolutions of the CRM in large commercial organisations at the turn of the 2000s and that scholars of the domain have identified under the heading of ‘mass customisation’ (Taylor and Bain, 1999; Frenkel, 2005). In this conceptualisation, CRM appears as a system that enables the call centre worker to read off a computer screen the information about the customer that is stored in the service provider’s database. But our field survey suggested that the project aimed to do a bit more than that. It relied on a combination of specific organisational provisions and technological innovations known as Computer Telephony Integration (CTI), a series of devices that enabled new modalities of interconnection between telephone networks and corporate information systems. According to both the presentation slideshows circulating around the project and the managers’ accounts, the aim was to introduce a small revolution in how customer service was treated. Let me briefly sketch the sociotechnical scenarios of these changes, as far as we were able to gather them over the course of the survey.

The basis of the system was the possibility of allocating customers to a call centre employee suited to their particular needs, based on a process of segmentation. For each customer present in the GT commercial database, a segment was calculated using data on former consumption practices and specific marketing algorithms. The call centre unit was divided into several sub-units, each devoted to a different segment, where employees were trained in providing differentiated answers, from both a technical and interactional point of view. When a customer would call the service, the incoming phone number was detected by the CTI system and used as a search term in the database. The customer record was retrieved and the call was routed to the relevant sub-unit not only in accordance

⁵ We carried out in-depth qualitative interview with twenty-five phone operators and fifteen managers, marketers and engineers, and recorded 130 customer-operator interactions. This empirical material was gathered according to prevailing ethical standards in the conduct of market research, guaranteeing notably the consent of employees of Global Telecom and the anonymity of all actors involved in the interviews and phone interactions. Fieldwork took place in call centres situated in Paris, Grenoble, Chambéry, Boulogne and Nantes.

with the motive declared to the IVR system by the customer ('To buy a new service, please press 1', 'To obtain information on your account, please press 2', 'To cancel a contract, please press 3', etc.), as is usual in call centre interactions, but also by taking into account the segmentation. The overall result was that mutual anonymity could be replaced by a singularised relationship that integrated customer desire (via the call motive) and identity (via the segmentation).

Call centre research and the analysis of market attachment

Using the distinction proposed by Barbara Gutek in her analysis of service provision in the modern era, one can say that the link between the customer and the call centre employee as it was conceived of in the SC project was typically a pseudo-relationship (Gutek, 1995):⁶ both actors are in a situation of mutual anonymity with 'something more' between them. How is it possible to analyse this 'something more' and to qualify the particular relationship at stake? Looking at research on call centres in the fields of organisation studies, management, marketing and sociology (Russel, 2008), this question refers to three analytical dimensions.

The first concerns the role of the client in the dynamics of service provision. Existing research on call centres tends to underexamine this aspect, as Marek Korczynski noted in his article on the 'mystery customer' (Korczynski, 2009). A large portion of the studies on call centres investigate their mode of organisation rather than the relationships with customers that they institute. The titles of early publications on call centres – for instance the reference to the assembly line in Taylor and Bain's (1999) seminal paper, or the reference to the 'modern factory' in the paper by Buscatto (2002) – testify to an interest more in organisational than commercial or economic issues. This remains largely true for recent research: sociologists interested in call centres have investigated such issues as the emergence of new forms of Taylorisation associated with this regime of productivity, the development of surveillance at work (Ball and Margulis, 2011), the construction of work cooperation in call centre units, the modality of emotional labour at stake in telephone interaction (Jenkins et al., 2010) and the specific forms of trade union mobilisation in this professional context (Taylor and Bain, 1999). In all these studies, the way in which the management of the customer relationship involves specific market devices is a very indirect concern. By contrast, it seems impossible to understand the changes brought by the SC project in the call centre without examining the way it modifies the very definition of the customer.

The second aspect concerns the technical devices involved. Call centre research quite rarely enters into the technical questions implied in the customer relationship. To a certain extent, one could say that many researchers in this domain carry out their surveys with the quite restricted definition of the 'technological content' of the

⁶ Barbara Gutek (1995) distinguishes between three situations of commercial relationship in service provision: it is an 'encounter' when the customer and the service worker are in a situation of total anonymity and are not supposed to interact anymore after the transaction; it is on the contrary a 'relationship' when both actors know each other and interact on a regular basis; it can be called a 'pseudo-relationship' in various intermediary situations, for instance when the customer doesn't personally know the employee but knows very well the organisation of the service provider, or when the service worker has information concerning the customer that make it possible to take into account specific needs and demands.

call centre CRM process that I have evoked above. While the definition is not in itself incorrect and may be largely sufficient for investigating managerial and human resource concerns, the sketchy character of its construction prevents any thorough examination of the technical and organisational mediations at stake in the production of specific market attachments. Most of the time, technology is, beyond these rudimentary elements, relegated to being part of the 'context' of activity, with the analysis focusing on managerial action, organisational routines and human resource prescriptions. This second limitation of existing research, when combined with the first, has the consequence that the customer is usually apprehended independently from the sociotechnical processes enacting his/her presence – in other words, it ignores the performative processes at stake in any customer relationship situation.

Thirdly, existing research tells us very little about the dynamic processes involved in the sociotechnical construction of the call centre as a stable device that, in a sense, 'sticks to the market'. This lack of a sufficiently dynamic perspective evokes a methodological issue that has long been well known in the field of the sociology of technology (Akrich, 1992): in order to grasp the social implications of a particular technology, one shouldn't describe it in a static way, but rather scrutinise dynamic configurations – for instance the historical trajectory of a project, or a situation of innovation. This makes it possible to follow the mutual shaping of technology and its uses. In spite of a few notable exceptions (Licoppe, 2002; Russel, 2007), this dimension is not really present in existing research. As I will show, looking at the construction of customer relations in the SC project in a dynamic way provides a key for understanding the construction of market attachments.

The plural sociotechnical inscriptions of the customer relationship

To address this issue, I will examine the plural sociotechnical inscriptions of the relationship that the SC project was designed to establish between the customer and GT. This perspective, which is informed by a pragmatist understanding of the notion of relation,⁷ takes a stance opposite to Barbara Gutek's analysis when she mobilises the concept of 'pseudo-relationship': the present view supports the idea that what is at stake here is not the substitution of a (interpersonal) relationship, but a plurality of (sociotechnical) relationships that have to be adjusted and articulated.

Four conceptions of the relationship

In the course of the field study, we asked the various practitioners to tell us what processes in the customer relationship-management process were to be impacted by the SC project. We were thus able to identify four different areas of practice where the notion of relationship was involved in one sense or another and where its sociotechnical inscription was to be modified. I propose to name these contrasting conceptions as follows: conversation, acquaintanceship, liaison and availability. Here I will only briefly qualify these four conceptions and the associated sociotechnical processes. I will pay particular attention to the way in which the customer is each time involved in this component of CRM via a specific

⁷ See Hennion (2015) and the very inspiring reflection on the notion of relation in James (1905).

actant.

Shaping commercial dialogue: relation as conversation

Each of the four modalities of relationship can be associated with a specific category of professionals that we interviewed as part of the research. The first modality, which I propose to label 'relation as conversation', represents the perspective of call centre employees themselves: undoubtedly, their work is based on a specific art of talking to the customer. This art can be observed in traditional, face-to-face market interactions (see Callon, this volume). It involves: politeness and the use of particular language conventions; compliance with an asymmetric interactional order where the customer appears as the important stakeholder ('the client as king'); a capacity to provide answers that at the same time deliver customer 'satisfaction' and remain compatible with the company's commercial objectives; an ability to interweave the diagnosis of customer requests and the promotion of new transactions; an ability to close a conversation at the right moment for the sake of productivity in the sales process (Vargha, 2011; Kessous and Mallard, 2014). To this generic ordering of commercial conversations, call centre interaction adds some peculiarities: bodily performance is absent and replaced by vocal activity; the employee is heavily assisted by information technology (he or she can usually read on-screen information that the customer doesn't have and is sometimes also provided with particular sentences to pronounce in given circumstances, etc.). To the extent that the production of commercial conversations is largely a collective construction, the sociotechnical inscription of this relationship involves other actors working in the back office: coaches, trainers, team leaders, designers of the scripts that guide commercial interaction, managers who set the incentives that orient salespersons towards the promotion of certain products or services, etc. Depending on the situation, the actant 'customer' can be endowed with very different skills: s/he can be defined as a talkative person, as a disciplined speaker, as a calculating or emotional individual, etc. In the SC project, this relational modality was characterised by the fact that in the shaping of commercial conversations, the customer segment intervened as a primary parameter for differentiating between contrasted actants and their specific interactional patterns: the conversation with the customer was intended to depend largely on the segment.

Indexing the customer in the database: relation as acquaintanceship

In call centres using CRM systems, customers are understood in the sales situation in relation to (they are *indexed by*) information present in the database that has been constituted over the course of earlier commercial processes. I propose to use the notion of acquaintanceship, a near translation of the French word *interconnaissance*, as a term for the conception of the relationship underlying this form of organisation. The idea here is that call centre actors should be in a position to mobilise knowledge about customers in order to get familiar with (understand, anticipate, penetrate, develop, elaborate on, etc.) their needs and expectations. This knowledge can potentially be used for various purposes: for instance, it can serve to shape the commercial conversation but can also determine who should answer the calls. The sociotechnical inscription of this relational modality involves the set of actors, data, devices and processes that are necessary to enact such an indexing, e.g. calculating information about the customer and delivering it to the appropriate actors. A customary concern here is the relevance of information likely to provide customer knowledge and to generate familiarity about needs and expectations in the associated situations.

As I explained above, customer indexing in the SC project notably involved a specific task of segmentation.⁸ It was taken on by marketers and experts of GT's customer database. Each customer in the database was characterised by the products and services s/he had bought from the operator – subscriptions to landline, mobile and internet services over a given period and the associated levels of consumption – as well as various other data concerning commercial processes that had been engaged. On the basis of this information, the commercial database was divided into a limited number of groups representing different market segments. Segments were identified with names that cannot be listed in detail here, but that were akin to standard labels in marketing culture, such as 'Stars' (customers with the potential for high levels of consumption), 'VIP' ('Very Important Person', for customers who have some sort of public influence), 'Moderate' (customers with a middling potential), 'Bad Payers' (customers having repeated payment issues), 'Winback' (customers that are transferring part of their consumption to an alternative operator, and that should be cared for in order to convince them to stay at GT), etc. It is on the basis of this set of standardised identities provided by the segmentation that the SC project proposed to index the actant 'customer' in the database.

Programming the routing of calls: relation as liaison

A third modality of relationship, which I propose to name 'liaison', concerns the establishment of an encounter between the customer and the commercial organisation. Encountering is a distributed process, requiring that both stakeholders symmetrically carry out the practical operations that enable them to meet and initiate interaction. Commercial organisations spend a lot of time and energy trying to shape this process on their side: at stake is not only the 'capture' of customers in stores and over the telephone, but also encouraging them to choose the right channel for their particular requirement (visiting the retail store, dialling the right telephone number, sending letters and emails to the right service, pressing the right key in the dialogue with an IVR system, etc.), passing a customer smoothly and efficiently from one interlocutor to another, etc. In call centre relationships, the sociotechnical inscription of the liaison mainly concerns the processes of call reception, routing and redirection. The software governing these operations is generally set and managed by marketers and information system engineers and, in spite of its importance, has been largely ignored by social scientists. As I have explained above, the originality of the liaison in the SC project is that it articulated two different actants: the customer as indexed in the commercial database through his or her segment and the customer as currently calling and expressing a desire as being recorded by the IVR system ('Are you calling to take out a new service?' 'Do you want to a contract?' 'To get information?' etc.).

Planning commercial manpower: relation as availability

A fourth modality of relation concerns its temporality. I propose to address this through the dimension of availability. Under what conditions is the call centre available to the customer? When is it ready to take a call in order to perform the

⁸ Alternative types of informational indexing are for instance scoring practices, qualifying customers in relation with given concerns, for example the appetite for a particular service. On the construction of scores and their use in sales situations, see Poon (2009) and Benedetto-Meyer (2014).

customer relationship? The sociotechnical inscription of this dimension involves the planning of call centre employees' work. It is one of the main professional prerogatives of call centre managers: they have to guarantee that enough people will be present in the call centre at any moment in order to ensure a customer waiting time that complies with service commitments that have been entered into. For this, call centre managers have to adjust two different temporalities: the frequency and duration of customer calls and the organisation of employees' working activities. Our field investigation showed that this work, roughly speaking, requires the matching of information given by two different instruments: on the one hand, the call centre schedule, showing the working hours of each employee; on the other hand, the load curve, showing how many customers are contacting the call centre at any given time. A central operation in the sociotechnical inscription of availability is the estimation of the number of employees that are necessary at any time, taking into account the number of customers expected and the average duration of conversations. Legal issues intervene in this planning activity, since employees' work schedules are largely framed by arrangements defined in their employment contracts, leaving only a small margin of adjustment for managers in their day-to-day negotiations. The actant 'customer' appears here in a particular way: s/he is one of the numerous people that have contacted the call centre at a given moment and helped define the position of a dot on the load curve. As we will see later, in the SC project, this task of planning commercial manpower took on a new dimension: the issue was not only determining how many people should be present in the call centre, but also organising their distribution across the different sub-units corresponding to the customer segments.

Instrumentality and open-endedness in the production of attachments

The reader might feel that the terms chosen to define the dimensions of relationship have a positive undertone, insisting on the active and open-ended dimension of attachments at stake. One may even take those terms as describing the features of relationship in a realm other than the market – the realm of friendship ties for instance: 'my friend' is typically someone who is available for me, has an acquaintanceship with my concerns, is ready to establish a liaison and enter into conversation with me. Those terms may be used to evoke what a market organisation is searching for when it tries to develop an open-ended and active relationship with customers. However, a customer relationship is very different from a friendship, and some more instrumental dimensions enter into account in the attachments at stake. Qualifying what comes under instrumentality or open-endedness is a quite difficult analytic task. In the scope of the present reflection, I will only provide some brief suggestions and examples illustrating how these issues concretely manifest in the field – and illustrating also that they would need further and more systematic examination.

From conversation to information exchange, manipulation or inauthenticity

Let me take first the case of commercial conversations. There are different ways to fold them into an instrumental expression. One is to eradicate every trace of humanity through the restricted use of standardised and fixed interactional scripts: the concern is no longer with the conversation but instead for a pure

exchange of information which excludes the possibility of opening the dialogue to any unforeseen issues. Another is to shift from the art of seduction (which might be acceptable in certain contexts) to the art of manipulation. Note that manipulation can be the result of an individual practice (for instance when a salesperson decides on his/her own to cheat a customer) or of an institutional or organisational arrangement (for instance when interactional scripts are designed so as to compel the client to take a decision). Note also that the border between open-endedness and instrumentality can be hard to trace here: in a commercial conversation, a sales pitch is acceptable but a lie is not. There is still another way to swing between instrumentality and open-endedness in commercial conversations: concerning the authenticity of the relationship. In play here are for example the games of identity that shape conversations. How should call centre employees introduce themselves: by using their real name, or a fake name, or a standardised and impersonal identity (Kessous and Mallard, 2014)? More generally, the whole debate around the meaning of the 'emotional labour' that is at stake in the call centre, and in service work in general (Hochschild, 1983; Jenkins et al., 2010), directly addresses this issue: depending on the conception, performing emotional labour can be considered as a way to deepen the interaction with customers or to cheat them.

Customer acquaintanceship: the construction of singularity at the risk of surveillance?

The ambition to use in the market interaction knowledge that has been produced from the customer's past consumption corresponds quite closely to the ideal of promoting singularity in the relationship: it is an attempt to weave a common history between the customer and the provider. This is actually the basis of the principle of 'mass customisation' that supports call centre interaction in general. Yet the tensions between the instrumental and open-ended character of the relationship clearly appear when considering the tenuous frontier between a desire for acquaintanceship and the will for surveillance. I had the opportunity to see a situation in the SC project where this frontier was under discussion. Indeed, in one of the call centres, employees were asked to record in the database information that might appear during their commercial conversations and that could be useful in the future. This request was justified as being motivated by 'improving the quality of customer records' or 'better knowing the customer so as to better address his expectations'. Different categories of information could be listed by GT as 'useful': the electronic devices present in the household, the size of the apartment, the number and ages of the children, etc. Our survey showed that, depending on the kind of information and on the way the gathering of it was concretely organised (Should the customer be explicitly informed? Should the employee ask targeted questions or just note information that emerged from the flow of conversation?), employees would feel more or less embarrassed about the practice: sometimes, they might feel that they were doing an ordinary job of data collection and generating value for the service, and sometimes that they were spying on customers and intruding into their private life.

From liaison to intrusion or capture

In general, it seems that the relationship remains open-ended and active when the process of liaison can be perceived by the customer as a simple encounter, e.g. as

a situation where the devices that it mobilises are symmetrically distributed on the side of both the customer and the organisation. If there is a feeling of asymmetry or a saturation of these devices, then the liaison becomes purely instrumental. This might be the case, for instance, when advertising (a major agent of liaison, as I explained above) becomes intrusive and irrelevant to the context in which it is perceived. It might also be the case when channels of communication form constrained trajectories or exclude particular opportunities. A case in point, one that can make the difference between an attachment being positive or negative, relates to the capacity of an IVR system to offer the customer relevant alternatives. The relationship may feel particularly instrumental when the system proposes options that do not match the customers' real concerns.

Negotiating the attachments of availability: making time a more flexible constraint

Let me finally comment, very briefly, on the dimension of availability. At first glance, the most open-ended relationship is achieved when the service is instantaneously and permanently accessible for all customers. However, achieving such an ambition is very costly for the provider – and for the customer, who usually pays for it, directly or indirectly. It is probably also unnecessary since customers tend not to need permanent access to the service and can accept a certain lack of instantaneity. Conversely, an instrumental situation is when the provider imposes its own criteria of availability on the customer, without any possibility of adjustment. It therefore seems to me that open-ended and active attachments are achieved when availability is not unilaterally limited and when it is made wholly negotiable. In call centres, this may be a matter of making their relation to time more flexible and easier to handle for the customer. All the devices and practices oriented in this direction might contribute to this: clear public information about the call centre's opening hours and, possibly, about periods of peak demand; information about expected waiting times when employees are all busy; providing alternative options for accessing the service when there is a lack of availability; the possibility of being called back, etc.

Market attachment and the art of dynamic implementation

Each of these four dimensions constitutes a way of apprehending customer relationships that corresponds to a particular viewpoint within the commercial organisation. Of course, none of the devices and processes described here, given that they were designed at the beginning of the SC project, mechanically leads to the existence of the customer relationship. The sociotechnical scripts underlying each of these modalities are tested in the implementation of CRM and the customer is performed as the relationship targeting him or her progressively takes shape. Conversational patterns generate unexpected customer reactions, leading in turn to the adaptation of conversations; the initial marketing definition of segments is enriched and changed as call centre activity produces new information concerning them; call routing procedures are adjusted in order to take into account the changing flows of demands; the shape of the call load curve is transformed as the call centre's capacity grows and waiting times decrease, etc. It is in the course of many technical and organisational adjustments of this sort that attachment between customers and the call centre emerges and is consolidated. These adjustments are particularly interesting when they combine several of the

modalities described above, because it is here that the relationship becomes stronger and more coherent. I will now enter more detail into three examples of these adjustments that were particularly visible in the SC project.

Adjusting conversation and acquaintanceship to improve market interaction

A first series of adjustments relates to the link between the 'customer-in-the-conversation' and the 'customer-in-the-database'. It questions the articulation between CRM as the management of conversations and as the indexing of customer information. Indeed, an important task for the call centre employees is to go back and forth between what they read on the screen and what they hear on the phone, as well as performing the interpretative work that enables their combination in order to deliver the particular service. This kind of interpretive activity raises specific issues that depend notably on the kind of information stored in the database.

Marie Benedetto-Meyer has studied an interesting case where customers are characterised in the database by a score calculated on the basis of former consumption practices in order to indicate their sensitivity to new products. Her analysis shows that different professionals in the commercial organisation in question, including its call centre employees, reconstruct the meaning of the score in a specific way, in spite of the efforts of the dataminers who have built the indicator to circumscribe a specific and stable interpretation (detto-Meyer, 2014). In the case of the SC project, many adjustments concerned the identity of customers, relating to the definition of the different groups in the segmentation. Before the reorganisation, call centre employees had followed a training session that presented the features of the customer segments with which they were to be confronted. They had to become familiar with the way the information system would qualify customers. But real work situations proved to be slightly different from what they had learnt during training: the stereotypes that had been presented and the related commercial expectations were not immediately prominent in their own experiences.

An emblematic example concerns the 'Star' segment. The SC project segmentation had been elaborated according to a method of estimating customer value, taking into account the amount of services consumed, of which customers in the 'Star' segment consumed a high volume. Call centre employees were told that customers in this segment had a specific sociodemographic composition (many of them were men in their forties or fifties, who held positions of responsibility at work and had a family with children) and high expectations both about matters of service and of their telecommunication products. However, experience showed that a number of customers in this segment had a totally different profile:

In the Star segment, we have numerous customers who do have a large bill, but who are also in the course of a payment incident. Our problem is to know whether these customers should be attracted and retained or not. Are they in the 'Star' segment just because they had a large bill at a given moment, but do not really have the commercial potential of a genuine large customer?

(Call centre employee)

Here, it seems that employees' experiences contradicted the marketers' hypothesis, that the clients who consumed a high level of services would also be likely to be interested in innovative products and services. This is a case where, to some extent, the statistical work that has been done upstream from the call centre is insufficient or incomplete, leading to a flawed representation of the market with erroneous categories of customers. But in many other situations, the gaps between the company's expectations and employees' experiences reflected the fact that there is no simple way to give practical or sociological meaning to aggregates fabricated by statistical work in a manner that can be helpful for a conversation with a customer.

Thus, during the early period of the SC project, a whole series of adjustments took place in both the call centre and the CRM system. These processes – through which the customer in the database, the customer holding a conversation and the call centre employee become ever more tightly attached to one another – are typically of two different kinds. On the one hand, the discrepancies that are brought to the fore during commercial conversations can give rise to new knowledge that is formalised and reinjected into the information system in order to improve the quality of informational indexing. On the other hand, call centre employees produce, individually and collectively, new meanings, conventions and narratives that, at this level, enable them both to articulate the different versions of the customers with which they are confronted and to make sense of the varieties of information at their disposal for the conduct of the commercial conversation. Experience suggests that the second process is much more common than the first: it is quite rare that new knowledge produced in the course of service work is collected, transformed and reutilised by marketers in the construction of their market models. From this point of view, the production of knowledge in commercial organisations still largely conforms to a hierarchical scheme.

Tuning conversation, liaison and availability to meet the demand

The second interesting dimension of adjustments bears on the routing of telephone calls. As I explained above, one of the strengths of the SC project was to match each customer to a specific employee, depending on the desires expressed by the customer on the IVR interface but also according to his/her market profile, as indicated by the segment. But the ability to deal with profiles in such a customised way requires the call flows to be anticipated well, not only for the whole population of consumers but also for each of the segments, in order to keep the waiting times within a normal range.

In the early period of implementation of the SC project, it appeared obvious that adaptations were necessary in the routing of calls. For instance, at certain moments, the traffic for one of the segments greatly exceeded the number of employees present in the corresponding call centre sub-unit. In this case, the software had been programmed to redirect the excess calls to other employees who were present in the call centre but specialised in another segment. This was a way to address customer demand without creating an overly long waiting time, but it clearly had a reduced commercial efficiency and delivered a quality of service that was lower than proposed by the differentiation approach. There were also anomalies the other way round. Thus, for instance, in one of the call centre units, an employee was allocated to 'Moderate' customer segment, corresponding to limited needs in terms of their telecommunication products and, as a result, to quite short average conversation times. But the call flow for this segment had been a little overestimated. As a consequence, the employee spent a large part of her

day waiting for the telephone to ring, which really is a rare situation in a call centre.

These examples show that the adjustments in play question the articulation between conversation, liaison and availability: the proper functioning of the system requires an adequacy between the average duration of the conversation within each segment, the dispatching of employees to the different sub-units and the associated call routing strategies. Since this delicate equilibrium between the differentiated supply and demand of telephone conversations cannot at any moment be fully obtained, an amount of flexibility is necessary. This is usually achieved through 'overflow strategies' that are programmed in the software governing call routing: when a call centre sub-unit is over-run, calls are rerouted to employees with available working time, as in the case evoked above. Overflow strategies may be complex to define since they are usually not symmetrical. Thus, in the SC project, it was common for employees who specialised in a given segment to be able to deal with the demands of other segments, but the contrary was not true. For instance, customers of the 'Moderate' segment could be treated by employees who specialised in the 'Star' segment, because this segment requires extended competences, but the opposite may not be straightforward.

The field study showed that in such situations two kinds of adjustment could take place, which, in implementing customer differentiation, operated according to two different temporalities. A short-term adjustment consisted in the reintroduction of human choice in the routing of calls, a process that was originally governed by a software algorithm: the call centre supervisor would independently monitor the ongoing traffic and, in the case of overflows, define ad hoc strategies on the basis of a personal knowledge of the skills of the different employees. In the long term, a more complex adjustment could be considered, one that required the production of previously unavailable but now refined knowledge: a load curve differentiated by segments. Indeed, the call centre manager already had a good knowledge of the load curve for the whole population of customers, but he ignored how the flow was distributed among the segments in each time period. Since the segments had been designed in order to target distinctive behaviours and expectations, they also corresponded to distinctive practices for calling customer services: for instance 'Star' customers would often call after working hours while 'Moderate' customers would rather tend to call during the day. A load curve differentiated by segments would enable a better estimation of the quantity of staff and a better definition of the overflow strategies necessary in different periods of the day and the week, thereby addressing demand more efficiently.

Recalibrating sales incentives to adapt to the new relationship

A third series of adjustments in the SC project touched upon the incentives and motivation policies involved in managing the sales process. It played on the articulations between conversation, acquaintanceship and availability. In call centres, sales employees are generally paid on the basis of their capacity to meet commercial objectives. This can be calculated using various indicators: the number of products sold in a given category, the number of customers handled per day, the amount of new information concerning customers entered into the corporate information system, etc. Each reorganisation in a call centre affects the calculation of incentives: since a new mode of organisation changes employees' activities, it also changes the values of indicators, and the amount of money finally paid.

The SC project is a case in point. Many of the call centre employees we met expressed concerns about this issue. The implementation of customer

differentiation by the project generated difficulties in how incentives were redefined. Some employees complained that they would earn less money than before, which appeared particularly paradoxical given that they had been recruited to the SC project on the basis of their high-level selling skills, skills that were necessary for the differentiation of customers and for their complex needs to be addressed: 'We do have an incentive but in the new system, the targets cannot be reached... We now get less money than before the customer differentiation project, this makes me nervous since they told me I was chosen because I was a good salesman' (a call centre employee).

Beyond this general complaint about calculative changes in the context of an organisational shake-up, more specific concerns were raised in the frame of the SC project. One of them related to the unevenness of the traffic in the early stages of the customer differentiation implementation, as I have evoked above: since the incentive largely depended on the number of clients dealt with by an employee, an irregular number of calls would have consequences on their salary. Another problem concerned the homogeneity of the indicators used by employees allocated to the different segments, and the risk of inequality that this could imply. Indeed, in the former system, each employee would handle a similar number of calls, with a comparable mix of different categories of customers, some of them having high needs while others had low needs. The amount of money paid would then really depend on the employee's performance, and not on the customers' features. In the new system, employees would by definition deal with a specific category of customers, and people doubted whether customers in the different segments would share the same interests for the same products – since, if not, this would result in differentiated incentives. Overall, a period of adjustment was necessary in order to better understand the commercial potential of the different categories of customers, and to determine how the incentives too had to be differentiated and recalibrated in order to enhance sales performance without generating iniquities among employees.

Conclusion

Attachments are very often considered from the perspective of the interpersonal relationship. CRM systems invite us to reflect on the processes that are necessary to attach the consumer not to a product or to a particular person but to a commercial organisation. In this chapter, I have shown that market attachments rest on a plurality of definitions of what makes the relationship between the customer and the organisation. This perspective offers the opportunity to consider the ambivalence of market attachments as expressed in each of these conceptions of the relationship. It invites us to investigate the various devices, processes and organisational arrangements producing customer relationships that can be, depending on each particular situation, either more instrumental or more active and open-ended. The multifaceted dimension of the customer relationship reflects the plurality of actors involved in the construction of CRM, and it points to a series of problems of coordination that are well known within commercial organisations: since these organisations are structured around the systematic investigation of customer identities and skills, they tend to multiply the number of protagonists involved as well as the approaches that are mobilised, leading to the question of their harmonious and efficient functioning as a coherent entity. The study shows the importance of adjustments between knowledge produced in several interconnected domains: in the definition of 'good categories' of customers through segmentation, in the appropriation of this by call centre employees, in the identification of customers' expectations of the availability of a service, in the identification of employees' skills and in the definition of their rewards, etc. That the art of market attachment is a knowledgeable art may not be a surprise. What the study of CRM

systems teaches us is the importance of this labour – of the collective production and coordination of knowledge – that is necessary for the relationship with the customer to appear.

Notes

I want to thank Joe Deville and Liz McFall for their suggestions on the writing of this chapter and for their help in the correction of the English. I also want to thank Antoine Hennion for a vivid discussion concerning the risks of a reckless use of the notion of attachment to describe market relations. All mistakes remaining in the text are mine.

An IVR system is an automatic device managing all the operations presented to the customer calling a call centre: a recorded or synthetic voice provides a series of messages explaining the content of the service, the customer is invited to press specific keys on the phone to access given services, music is offered while the caller is on hold, the call is automatically routed to given service, etc.

All names of companies, projects, places and people used in this chapter are pseudonyms.

Another explicit purpose of the project was to federate and homogenise the customer relationship carried out by the different services and subsidiaries of GT. This secondary purpose was slightly less important, and in spite of its potential interest, I won't examine this aspect in the present text.

We carried out in-depth qualitative interview with twenty-five phone operators and fifteen managers, marketers and engineers, and recorded 130 customer-operator interactions. This empirical material was gathered according to prevailing ethical standards in the conduct of market research, guaranteeing notably the consent of employees of Global Telecom and the anonymity of all actors involved in the interviews and phone interactions. Fieldwork took place in call centres situated in Paris, Grenoble, Chambéry, Boulogne and Nantes.

Barbara Gutek (1995) distinguishes between three situations of commercial relationship in service provision: it is an 'encounter' when the customer and the service worker are in a situation of total anonymity and are not supposed to interact anymore after the transaction; it is on the contrary a 'relationship' when both actors know each other and interact on a regular basis; it can be called a 'pseudo-relationship' in various intermediary situations, for instance when the customer doesn't personally know the employee but knows very well the organisation of the service provider, or when the service worker has information concerning the customer that make it possible to take into account specific needs and demands.

See Hennion (2015) and the very inspiring reflection on the notion of relation in James (1905).

Alternative types of informational indexing are for instance scoring practices, qualifying customers in relation with given concerns, for example the appetite for a particular service. On the construction of scores and their use in sales situations, see Poon (2009) and Benedetto-Meyer (2014).

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