Intimacy across borders

New competencies and strategies for international relationship management

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Zuyd Research

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9 October 2015

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ISBN: 978-94-62287-04-4

The relationship management paradigm

> Selling is not marketing…. Selling concerns itself with the tricks and techniques of getting people to exchange their cash for your product. It is not concerned with the values that the exchange is all about…. The customer is somebody out there who, with proper cunning, can be separated from his loose change.

Levitt (1960, p. 55)

According to the Harvard economist Theodore Levitt, business leaders in the late 1950s perceived their customers as targets to be tricked. Therefore, he challenged managers to become more customer oriented and think of themselves "not as producing products, but as providing customer-creating value satisfactions" (Levitt, 1960, p. 56). To ensure companies' long-term survival, Levitt encouraged managers to "push this idea (and everything it means and requires) into every nook and cranny of the organization" (Levitt, 1960, p. 56).

Levitt's ideas, in combination with seminal contributions from Bagozzi (1974) and Berry (1983), form the foundation of the concept of *customer relationship management* or *CRM* (Boulding, Staelin, Ehret, & Johnston, 2005). This approach to marketing emphasizes the creation of customized value for a select group of customers, which ultimately results in a mutually beneficial, long-term relationship between these customers and the firm. Since the 1990s, CRM has emerged as one of the dominant paradigms in marketing, and its underlying rationale has been extended to relationships with other stakeholders, such as suppliers (e.g., Moeller, Fassnacht, & Klose, 2006), employees (e.g., Strohmeier, 2013), investors (e.g., Helm, 2007), and donors (e.g., Waters, 2008).

For CRM to be effective, an organization must develop *customer intimacy*, that is, a deep understanding of customers' wants and needs (Treacy & Wiersema, 1993). In practice, most companies try to achieve this by gathering information about the personal characteristics and buying behavior of their customers, which they then use to engage in activities such as market segmentation, cross-selling, customized communications, or the identification of potential new customers (Boulding et al., 2005; Payne & Frow, 2005). Technology plays an important role in this process, in that companies need to collect, store, and analyze vast quantities of customer data (Jayachandran, Sharma, Kaufman, & Raman, 2005). This has led to the development of numerous hardware and software products that are explicitly sold as *CRM solutions* (Boulding et al., 2005).

Despite arguments that CRM actually should be conceptualized as a mindset, rather than a system (Jacobsen, 2010), the words *data* and *technology* figure prominently in current scholarly writings about CRM. For example, Ngai, Xiu, and Chau (2009, p. 2592) claim that "customer data and information technology (IT) tools form the foundation upon which *any* successful CRM strategy is built" [emphasis added]. Chao, Jen, Chi and Lin (cited in Awasthi & Sangle, 2012) even refer to CRM as "one of the greatest technological contributions to enterprises in the twenty-first century."

Can data really create intimacy?

This strong emphasis on technology is understandable, considering the recent developments in the field of big data, but it is important to keep in mind that collecting information in itself is not sufficient to develop a meaningful relationship with a customer; it is merely a potential first step. As Barnes (1994) explains, true relationships have characteristics that go beyond the act of sending customized communications to customers on the basis of information recorded in a database.

In particular, a purely data-driven approach to CRM fails to provide any evidence of caring about the customer (Barnes, 1994, p. 565). Caring is an essential element of any satisfying relationship, together with support, loyalty, prioritizing the other's interests, honesty, and trustworthiness (Barnes, 1994). However, it is difficult for companies to display such properties in a message that has been created not by an employee who has personally interacted with the addressee, but rather by a data mining algorithm with just basic information at its disposal about the addressee's preferences.

Consider a familiar example of database marketing in practice: the buying recommendations provided by Amazon. When I log on to my Amazon account, I receive the following recommendations:

Figure 1 - Buying recommendations by Amazon

Most of the suggested books are autobiographies of British rugby players, and for me, they are useful; I had decided to buy two of these books even before Amazon recommended them to me. Furthermore, they are transparent. Clicking on one of the *Why recommended?* links provides me with a pop-up window, showing how this recommendation relates to my previous purchases from Amazon (Figure 2). Other customers bought both the recommended book and one of the four autobiographies that I had ordered previously, so Amazon assumes that I might be interested in this particular product.

But to make such a recommendation, Amazon needs to know very little about me or the recommended product. Nothing in the way this recommendation is presented suggests that Amazon is aware of my fanatical passion for rugby, or my habit of reading sports autobiographies during the summer holiday. Moreover, Amazon appears only partly interested in my opinion about the quality of the recommendation. I can indicate my lack of interest in a suggested item or remove a prior purchase from the list of considered products used to generate new recommendations. But I cannot tell Amazon *why* I am not interested in a particular item—for example, because I prefer to read about the lives of players who play in forward positions, such as Trevor Brennan or Martyn Williams, rather than those who play back, like Jonny Wilkinson or Will Greenwood.

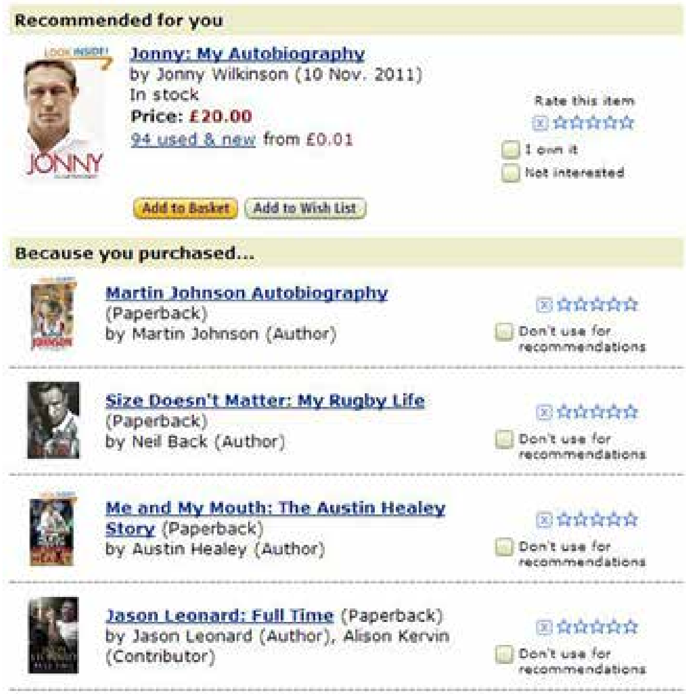

Figure 2 - Justification of recommendations by Amazon

Thus, the relationship between Amazon and me—if we can consider that it exists at all—is not exactly equal. Amazon is more than willing to talk to me, but it has only a limited desire to listen, which ultimately results in some suboptimal recommendations (e.g., for autobiographies of backs). According to Barnes (1994), this lack of equality is typical of the way most companies implement CRM in practice. It still is something that is mostly done *to* customers rather than *with* them (Barnes, 1994).

In turn, customers tend to be wary of companies that approach them with personalized offers, especially if those offers are based on data gathered by a company without customers' consent (O'Malley, Patterson, & Evans, 1997). Customers do not regard the collection of information by companies as the first phase of relationship development; they perceive it as an intrusion, which is nearly the polar opposite of the intimacy that companies are trying to create (Morey, Forbath, & Schoop, 2015; O'Malley et al., 1997).

These developments suggest that in many contemporary approaches to CRM, some essential ingredients for the creation of genuine intimacy are missing. In this inaugural lecture, I first introduce three ingredients that are often overlooked but are nonetheless indispensable for successful relationship management. Furthermore, I explain why they are important, especially in an international context. Next, I present an overview of current and future research by our Research Centre that seeks to reveal both the powerful flavors of these three ingredients and their effectiveness for developing long-term relationships with international stakeholders. Finally, I will demonstrate how students, lecturers, professionals, and companies all can benefit from the Centre's research and related activities.

Ingredient 1: A gallon of interaction

> Much of human courtship is verbal courtship: 'boy meets girl' usually means boy and girl talk.... After basic greetings, verbal courtship intensifies, progressing through self-introduction, observations concerning immediate social surroundings, compliments, and offers of minor favors. If mutual interest is displayed, people go on to trade more personal information, searching for mutual acquaintances, shared interests, and ideological common ground.... If we assume two hours of talk per day in the early stages of a sexual relationship, and three words spoken per second (an average rate), each member of a couple would have uttered about a million words before they conceive any offspring.
>
> Miller (2001, pp. 351-356)

In *The Mating Mind*, evolutionary psychologist Geoffrey Miller stresses the importance of verbal interaction during courtship, generally regarded as the first step toward an intimate relationship. For him, this is interesting because it increases the likelihood that sexual selection has played a role in the evolution of humans' capacity to use language. For us, it is interesting because it suggests that many words need to be exchanged before a company can claim to have any sort of relationship with a stakeholder.

The idea that intensive, two-way communication is crucial to develop intimacy is not new. Scholars and practitioners have long urged companies to intensify their interactions with key stakeholders, mostly because communication is a necessary antecedent of trust (Anderson & Narus, 1990). What many companies fail to recognize though is that an interaction is not the same as a transaction (O'Malley et al., 1997). In interactions, participants exchange information, thoughts, or feelings; in transactions, they exchange money, goods, or services. Transactions clearly are important, in that they help companies achieve short-term financial goals, but interactions also are important, because they help companies create long-term, trust-based relationships with stakeholders.

However, some scholars doubt whether it is possible, or even necessary, for interactions in a business setting to be as frequent and profound as interactions in personal relationships. According to Barnes (1994), the question of whether customers perceive their dealings with companies as actual relationships is still an open one. Similarly, O'Malley et al. (1997) point out that not all customers are interested in entering into long-term exchange relationships.

An interesting new perspective, from Andrew Sobel and Jerold Panas in their 2014 book *Power Relationships*, reflects the opinions expressed by senior executives during in-depth interviews with the authors. Their quotes illustrate that successful business relationships often start with multiple conversations that do not necessarily relate to business development or closing a transaction. For example, a managing partner at Deloitte recounts how she spent 5 years cultivating a relationship with a potential client, who had been doing business with a competitor for 40 years. During these years, she met with the CEO of this firm nearly monthly, without ever discussing Deloitte's expertise or the possibility of using its services. The main purpose of the conversations was to deliver market information and new ideas that might be helpful to the potential client. Ultimately, a trusting relationship emerged, which helped Deloitte secure the new account it so highly desired (Sobel & Panas, 2014, pp. 89-90).[1]

The idea that fruitful relationships originate from interactions rather than transactions turns out to be a recurrent theme in the interviews conducted by Sobel and Panas (2014). It is directly reflected in at least 7 of the 26 "laws" they present, including the very first one: "Power relationships are based on great conversations, not on one person showing the other how much they know." This law in turn points to the second ingredient that companies tend to overlook when pursuing customer intimacy.

1 This example refers to a business-to-business relationship, but the idea of helping customers first, before selling to them, also has taken hold in the business-to-consumer world, where it is often put into practice through content marketing (Van Belleghem, 2015).

Ingredient 2: One part content, one part form

> Having a sense of a person—their disposition, character, way of being in the world—and knowing about them—where they grew up, how many siblings they have, what they majored in, where they work—are two rather different things. Just like security, so does intimacy have both form and content.
>
> Christian (2011, p. 18)

What is the best way to get to know somebody in a relatively short time? Ask factual questions to gather detailed personal information, or simply engage in a casual conversation? Aish HaTorah, the organization that invented the concept of speed dating, seems to think that form is more important than content in this case (Christian, 2011). During its events, participants are forbidden to ask questions about others' jobs, where they live, or where they were raised. Instead, speed daters are encouraged to keep the conversation as light and whimsical as possible. The rationale for this rule is that it forces participants to focus on how the other person behaves during the interaction, which is a far more accurate reflection of their personality and character than their profession, salary, or residence.

But such rules contrast sharply with the strategies that companies commonly use to create intimacy with stakeholders. For example, many firms restrict themselves to gathering "content data" in their CRM systems, such as demographics, contact details, and information about prior purchases. What generally fails to get recorded is any information about the impressions that customers make during their interactions with the company: Are they emotional, cynical, understanding, indifferent? Such information can be very relevant, because it predicts, among other things, the cultural model that the customer adheres to in their relationship with the company.

Ringberg, Odekerken-Schröder, and Christensen (2007) distinguish three models to account for differences among customers' reactions to service failures. Customers who apply a relational model tend to feel emotionally attached to the company, those with an oppositional cultural model are afraid of being exploited, and utilitarian customers continuously weigh the benefits of any relationship against the costs. In service recovery situations, relational customers tend to be satisfied with a sincere apology and admission of wrongdoing by the company. Oppositional customers instead want to control the recovery process. For utilitarian customers, the most important factor is whether the recovery is handled quickly, with appropriate compensation offered for any effort or time they invest. To discover which model a certain customer applies, Ringberg et al. (2007) suggest using prescreening tools, such as questionnaires for new customers. However, recording how a customer acts during a service interaction could also provide a good basis for such classifications and predictions.

The dominance of content over form is evident not just in the data that companies collect but also in the way they address potential relationship partners during interactions. In a recent research project, in which our Research Centre collaborated with students from the Hotel Management School Maastricht (Brand et al., 2015; Pluymaekers et al., in press), the students conducted mystery visits, non-participant observations, and an experiment at a large airport hotel in the Netherlands. In this hotel, frontline employees may spend a certain Euro amount on each guest, either to provide compensation for an initial service failure or to surprise the guest with a small gift or complementary service. The rationale for this policy is that it empowers employees to create memorable experiences for guests. However, the students' careful observations revealed instead that employees did not exhibit substantial creativity when presenting guests with complementary gifts or services, nor did they tend to present a service or gift as specifically selected for a guest.

In a subsequent scenario experiment, the students found that presenting a gift as specifically selected for that guest (i.e., a personalization strategy) offered a very powerful potential option. They presented guests with four scenarios, in which two variables were manipulated independently: (1) the monetary value of the complementary service offered to a guest and (2) the degree to which personalization was applied during the presentation of this service. After reading each scenario, the participating guests indicated how they felt about the complementary service. Regression analyses revealed that across all four scenarios, perceived personalization was a stronger predictor of their satisfaction with the service than perceived monetary value (see Table 1; ** indicates a significant effect). In other words, form was more important than content for these customers.

	Scenario 1		Scenario 2		Scenario 3		Scenario 4	
	St. beta coeff.	*p*-value	St. beta coeff.	*p*-value	St. beta coeff.	*p*-value	St. beta coeff.	*p*-value
Perceived monetary value	0.121	0.134	0.294	0.000**	0.238	0.002**	0.219	0.002**
Perceived persona-lization	0.416	0.000**	0.488	0.000**	0.505	0.000**	0.571	0.000**

Table 1 - Regression results for perceived monetary value and perceived personalization in Pluymaekers et al. (in press)

Hoefnagels, Bloemer, and Pluymaekers (2015) report a similar result from a study in which participants viewed video vignettes of a check-in situation in a hotel, in which two variables were manipulated independently: (1) the intercultural competence (IC) and (2) technical competence (TC) displayed by the service employee. For both of the dependent variables—customer comfort and encounter satisfaction as perceived by the customer— the effect of IC (operationalized as a combination of cultural empathy, open-mindedness, flexibility, emotional stability, and social initiative) turned out to be much stronger than the effect of TC (a combination of capability, efficiency, and organization). Employees could largely compensate for their poor TC with higher IC, but not the other way around. As Figure 3 shows, the average scores for the low TC–high IC condition are even higher than those for the high TC–low IC condition. Using the body as a metaphor, this suggests that the execution of the so-called skeleton of the service (i.e., providing check-in) can be less important than the delivery of the surrounding tissue (i.e., making a foreign guest feel comfortable).

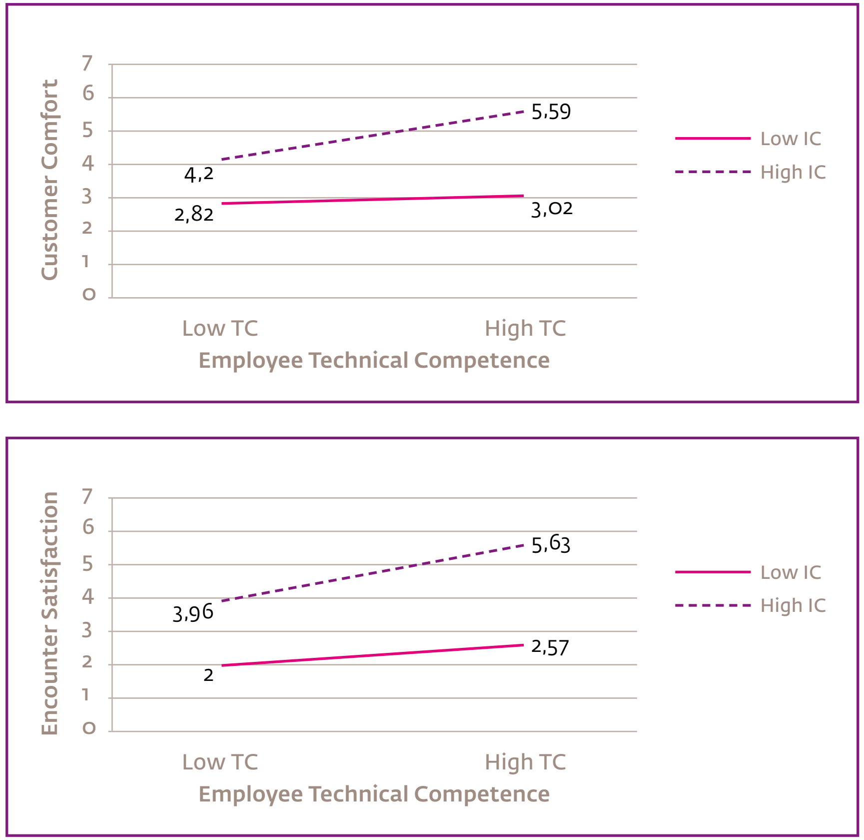

Figure 3 - Interaction effects of employee technical competence and employee intercultural competence on customer comfort and encounter satisfaction in Hoefnagels et al. (2015)

Ingredient 3: A dash of emotion

> People crave emotional intimacy and authenticity in their relationships. And they know when it's missing.... Studies have shown that when we try to hide our feelings, the blood pressure of the people we are talking to rises.
>
> Sobel and Panas (2014, p. 99)

In an age when contact with customers is increasingly digitized and automated, the human element has the potential to distinguish between success and failure when it comes to building strong relationships. However proficient computers may be at generating recommendations, confirming orders, or identifying mistakes, they cannot (yet) create a positive, emotional connection with a customer (Van Belleghem, 2015). This positive connection, or *rapport* (Gremler & Gwinner, 2008), is important because it enhances the loyalty of both customers and employees and ultimately increases firm profitability (Van Belleghem, 2015).

Van Belleghem (2015) cites several reasons why human involvement is necessary to create a positive emotional connection. In particular, only humans can display genuine emotions during interactions with customers or other stakeholders. This display of emotions is potentially very powerful. Hennig-Thurau, Groth, Paul, and Gremler (2006) demonstrate that positive emotions displayed by a service employee in a face-to-face interaction can transfer automatically to the customer, provided that the customer perceives the employee's display as authentic. Svenja Widdershoven, a PhD candidate at our Research Centre, has replicated this so-called *emotional contagion* effect in a social media context. Her experimental results suggest that even the simple inclusion of positive (☺) or negative (☹) emoticons by a service employee in a Twitter conversation has a significant effect on the emotional state of the customer with whom he or she interacts.

Unfortunately, many companies do not allow employees to display emotions spontaneously during service interactions. Instead, they are required to follow standard operating procedures (SOPs), which leave little room to establish an actual connection with the person on the other side. Christian (2011, p. 145) describes this phenomenon as follows:

> *Sadly, the person you are talking to is frequently a kind of expert system in their own right, with extremely limited and delineated abilities.... Often, in fact, the human you are talking to is speaking from a script prepared by the company and not, in this sense, much more than a kind of human chatbot—this is part of what can make talking to them feel eerie.*

The level to which a conversation with an employee who rigidly sticks to a script can get eerie is illustrated effectively by a recording that technology journalist Ryan Block (2014) published on SoundCloud. In the recording, Block calls the U.S. telecom provider Comcast to cancel his subscription. Instead of simply carrying out the customer's request, the service employee keeps asking questions about the reasons for the cancellation, presumably to coax Block into changing his mind. Ultimately, the conversation results in not just an angry customer, but also an angry employee, as the transcript in Table 2 reveals.

R: We'd like to disconnect please...
C: Help me understand why you don't want faster internet.
R: Help me understand why you can't just disconnect us.
C: My job is to have a conversation with you about keeping your service, about finding out why it is you're looking to cancel your service. If you don't want to talk to me, you can definitely go into the Comcast store and cancel your service there....
R: Can you cancel us by phone? The answer is yes, correct?
C: It sounds like you don't want to go over this information with me. If you want to go over that information, that's the easiest way to get your account disconnected.
R: I am declining to state why we are leaving Comcast because I don't owe you an explanation. So, if you can proceed to the next question. If you have to fill out a form, that's fine. Please proceed to the next question and we'll attempt to answer that if possible.

C: Being that we're the number 1 provider of TV and internet service in the entire country, why is it you don't want the number 1 provider?...
R: I'm declining to state. Can you please go to the next question so we can cancel our service?
C: I'm just trying to figure out here what it is about Comcast service that you're not liking....
R: This phone call is an amazing representative example of why I don't want to stay with Comcast. So, can you please cancel our service?
C: I'm trying to help you. You're not letting me help you by declining answers, by doing all this.
R: You can help me by disconnecting our service.
C: How is that helping you?
R: Because that's what I want.
C: Why is that what you want?
R: Because that's what I want.

Table 2 - Partial transcript of Ryan Block's (R) conversation with a service employee from Comcast (C)

One of the many mistakes made by the employee in this example is his failure to recognize, acknowledge, or regulate the emotions expressed by the customer. The ability to deal effectively with emotions during service interactions is commonly referred to as *emotional competence* (Delcourt, 2011; Giardini & Frese, 2008). The impact of emotional competence has been investigated recently by another group of students from the Hotel Management School Maastricht (Hamann, Jacobs, Massar, Sluijmer, & Van Thiel, 2015). They presented participants with videos of a check-in situation in which the receptionist informed the guest of a delay in the availability of her room. The main experimental manipulation was the emotional competence of the receptionist: In one condition, she

acknowledged the negative emotions of the guest and expressed her sympathy and concern, whereas in the other condition, she restricted herself to a formal apology and immediately started arranging a compensatory service.

The dependent variables in this study were the positive and negative emotions experienced by the participant, the rapport established between the receptionist and the participant, and the participant's loyalty intentions. All four variables were affected by emotional competence: The negative emotions experienced by the participant decreased in the high emotional competence condition, whereas the positive emotions, rapport, and loyalty increased (see Figure 4). The students also investigated whether the effects of the emotional competence displayed during the first service failure would transfer to evaluations of a subsequent service failure, announced by the same or a different receptionist. They did not, for either the same receptionist or a different one. Apparently, service employees must display high levels of emotional competence every single time they deliver bad news to customers.

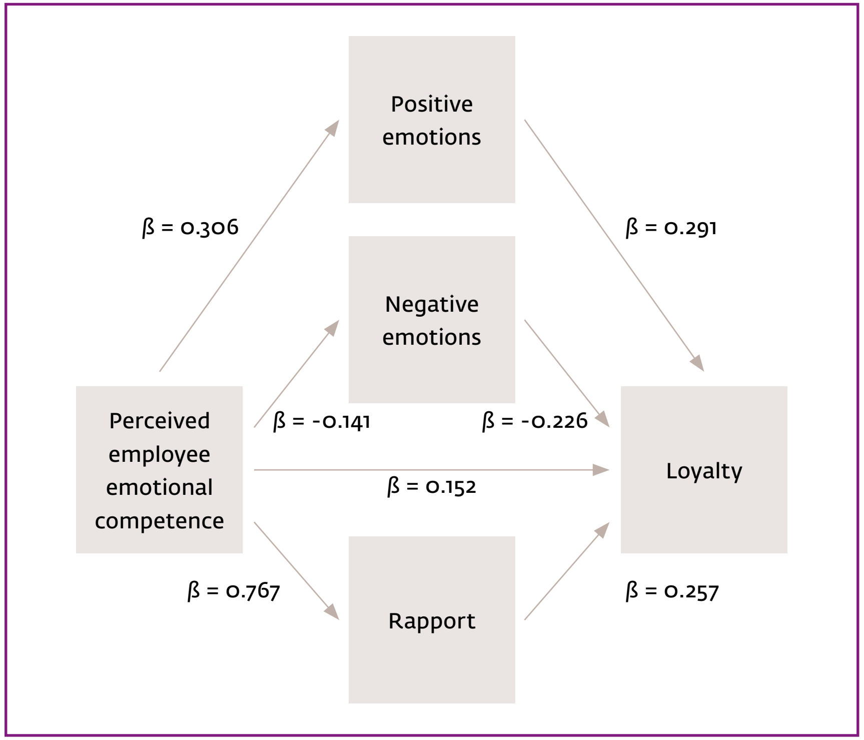

Figure 4 - Effects of employee emotional competence on customer emotions, rapport, and loyalty as demonstrated by Hamann et al. (2015)

With regard to the exact words that can soften the emotional impact of a service failure, an earlier project by students from the Hotel Management School (Houweling, Van Laarhoven, Ligthart, Santelia, & Verhoeven, 2013) involved an experiment to assess the effects of communication strategies that emphasize (1) solidarity with the customer, which Brown and Levinson (1987) refer to as *positive politeness*, or (2) respect and humility toward the customer, which Brown and Levinson call *negative politeness*. For example, a positive politeness expression might be, "I understand that this is really inconvenient for you," whereas negative politeness appears in utterances such as, "I sincerely apologize for this inconvenience." In the experiment, both strategies had positive effects on customers' trust in the organization and satisfaction with the recovery, but loyalty intentions were only affected by the use of positive politeness. For satisfaction, the effect of positive politeness was stronger for the Dutch participants in the experiment than for the German participants, which suggests that even if the existence of these two types of politeness is universal (Brown & Levinson, 1987), their effects on recipients are not.

Companies also can use emotions to achieve positive relational outcomes by incorporating stories into their communications. Stories and other narratives allow storytellers to inject passion and emotion into the interaction, while simultaneously enabling listeners to imagine the events and relive the emotions originally experienced by the protagonist (Haven, 2007; Heath & Heath, 2008). In recent years, the power of stories has been rediscovered by marketers and advertisers, many of whom apply story elements to brand their products and services (Sachs, 2012). Of course, mass advertising is not the only medium through which a company can share a story with its stakeholders; it can also be done in content marketing or face-to-face interactions among managers, employees, and customers.

Heath and Heath (2008) provide a striking example of a company that uses stories to transform the mindset of its frontline employees: the U.S. department store Nordstrom, which wants to be known for providing the best customer service in the industry. To make this abstract notion more concrete, stories recount the exploits of "Nordies" who go to extremes to make their customers happy. Examples include an employee who ironed a shirt for a customer who had an important meeting later that day, another who gift-wrapped a present bought at a different department store, and yet another employee who refunded a customer returning a set of tire chains, even though Nordstrom does not sell tire chains. Such stories provide Nordstrom employees with behavioral guidance and a sense of what is expected of them; they also have a profound effect on external image of the company.

In summary, the three ingredients that appear pivotal for creating intimacy in business relationships are interaction, form, and emotions. The effects of these three ingredients are not independent: The interaction provides the context that allows for form and emotions to make long-lasting impressions on customers and other stakeholders.

The international context

In the discussion thus far, only limited attention has centered on the complexities of relationship management in an *international* or *intercultural* setting. It is a relevant issue though, because globalization has prompted vast increases in the numbers of companies and customers who are broadening their horizons by going abroad. Furthermore, societies are growing more multicultural, due to widespread migration and cultural hybridization (Douglas & Craig, 1996; Nederveen Pieterse, 2015).

As my predecessor José Bloemer (2009) pointed out in her inaugural lecture, misunderstandings, miscommunication, and mismanagement are more likely when two parties involved in a business relationship come from different parts of the world. Culture has profound effects on our values, preferences, expectations, and communicational behavior (De Mooij, 1994; Hofstede, 1984). But does this mean that intimacy in cross-cultural relationships is an illusion? Not necessarily. In fact, I argue that the three ingredients are effective not just in our local kitchens but also—and perhaps even more so—in situations marked by physical, psychological, or cultural barriers that might hamper the development of a successful relationship. I will explain why next.

Interaction

Frequent interactions with international stakeholders are required because the physical distance demands that these interactions often are mediated by technology. As convenient as such technologically supported interactions may be, they will lead to an inevitable decrease in the quality of information transfer. E-mails and telephone conversations simply cannot support the kind of rich information exchange that face-to-face communication does (Daft & Lengel, 1984). Increasing interaction frequency could therefore be a useful strategy to compensate for the loss of information that occurs during individual interaction episodes.

In addition, notable differences arise from the short- vs. long-term orientation cultural dimension—the so-called fifth Hofstedian dimension. In cultures that are long-term oriented (e.g., China, Japan, Brazil), potential business partners invest a lot of time into building a trusting relationship before they proceed to business. The previous example of the Deloitte executive, for whom it took five years to acquire a new client, would not be remarkable in such a culture (as it was in the U.S. setting in which she worked). Therefore, frequent interaction is not just useful but possibly necessary for firms that seek to engage with stakeholders who have non-Western backgrounds.

Form

A similar point applies to form: In many cultures, the meaning of a message lies not in its literal content but in the things that are left unsaid, such that meaning must be inferred from the form chosen by the speaker or the communication context (Hall, 1976). In such high-context cultures, people are more sensitive to subtle relational cues in a message, whether expressed verbally or non-verbally (Sanchez-Burks, 2002). Consequently, the effects of the politeness strategies investigated by Houweling et al. (2013) may be even more pervasive in cultures other than the Netherlands or Germany, both of which are considered low-context (Claes & Gerritsen, 2011). Ting-Toomey (1985) also predicts that low- and high-context cultures have different preferences with regard to face-saving strategies in communication.

Emotions

Establishing a positive emotional connection might be even more important in interactions with strangers than in interactions with stakeholders with whom we share a cultural background, due to the lower levels of comfort that characterize intercultural interactions (Sharma, Tam, & Kim, 2010). Because they are not sure what to expect, people involved in such interactions often experience negative emotions such as anxiety and uncertainty (Gudykunst, 2005). But these negative emotions might be eliminated if one member of the interaction displays an ability to bridge the cultural distance between the two interlocutors (Hoefnagels et al., 2015).

Stories also have characteristics that make them particularly effective in international settings. In particular, they tend to follow similar structures, regardless of the culture or tradition from which they originate (Campbell, 1968). Furthermore, they unfold in interactions, so the storyteller can highlight elements to which the listener is likely to respond positively. According to Andersen and Rask (2014), stories therefore represent suitable vehicles for communicating new business ideas across borders and institutional contexts.

Our research: Competencies and strategies

Interaction, form, and emotions constitute the common thread in the research conducted by our Research Centre. To be more precise, we conduct research into communication strategies and professional competencies that effectuate the power of form and emotions in interactions with international stakeholders. In some cases, the boundary between strategies and competencies is rather fuzzy, in that competencies often manifest themselves in communication behaviors that could be considered strategies. Still, there are differences in the way we approach these two domains in our research: For communication strategies, we are mainly interested in their effects, whereas for professional competencies, we look at both their effects and the process through which they develop. The research program that most clearly exemplifies this dual emphasis is Global Minds.

Global Minds

Officially, the Global Minds program started in 2014, but its roots can be traced back to the research that Ankie Hoefnagels (2014) initiated several years prior to complete her doctoral thesis within our Research Centre. Its central concept was *intercultural competence*, which Deardorff (2006, p. 184) defines as "the ability to communicate and behave effectively and appropriately in intercultural situations based on one's intercultural knowledge, skills and attitudes." Increasing numbers of academics and practitioners recognize that intercultural competence outperforms culture-specific knowledge when it comes to dealing with cultural diversity (e.g., Chen & Starosta, 1999), mainly because intercultural competence is generic and can be applied in any intercultural situation, regardless of the specific cultural background of the people involved.

Hoefnagels's research also demonstrates that companies with international ambitions should invest in the intercultural competence of their employees, which invokes appreciation from international customers while also helping employees cope with the emotional dissonance that tends to arise during intercultural service encounters. Ultimately, employee intercultural competence has a positive effect on all three cornerstones of the service triangle (Zeithaml & Bitner, 1996): Customers evaluate the service more positively, employees are more satisfied with their jobs, and managers need to worry less about staff turnover and dissatisfied customers.

These findings underline the importance of developing the intercultural competence of students enrolled in internationally oriented study programs, such as the Hotel Management School, European Studies, or International Business. Global Minds supports this process in several ways. First, it invites students to complete a questionnaire before and after their international exchanges. This questionnaire, called the Global Mind Check, was specifically developed by Ankie Hoefnagels, Geer Hoppenbrouwers, and Armand Odekerken to monitor the development of students' intercultural competence. Those who complete both questionnaires (thus far, approximately 200 students spread over five departments at Zuyd) receive a personalized report describing how their intercultural competence has developed during their stay abroad, as well as advice about how they might improve certain subcomponents of this competence, such as emotional stability or cultural empathy. The purpose is not to provide a summative assessment of students' intercultural competence but to help them reflect on their own personal development. For the Research Centre, the Global Mind Check also yields large amounts of quantitative, longitudinal data on the development of intercultural competence in these young students. These data can provide input for deriving new models that describe the process through which intercultural competence develops.

Second, because quantitative data alone cannot provide the complete picture, Ankie Hoefnagels and Barbara Piškur currently are developing a qualitative monitoring tool as well. This tool, provisionally dubbed the Global Mind Blog, provides a framework for lecturers to identify linguistic markers of improved intercultural competence in blogs written by students while they are abroad. Examples of such blogs can be found on the website *icaworld.nl*, where students of the Hotel Management School Maastricht share and reflect on their experiences in faraway countries.

Beyond the realization of the Global Mind Blog, the Global Minds project team has great ambitions for the next three years. The Global Mind Check will be refined and shortened, to facilitate its application across other faculties of Zuyd and other institutions of higher education. A 360-degree feedback module will be added, so that lecturers or internship providers can rate the student's intercultural competence too. All lecturers who are planning to work with the Global Mind tools will receive training; interested companies will have the opportunity to hire specialized consultants. Ultimately, the outcomes of the different studies conducted within the Global Minds project will be widely disseminated through academic, professional, and popular media.

Message Design

The Message Design program aims to discover which communication strategies are most effective in situations when the relationship between a company and its (international) stakeholders is at stake. Many study programs at Zuyd devote attention to communication in one way or another; Message Design helps the students of these programs investigate the effectiveness of certain communication design choices that will be relevant for their respective professional fields. By engaging in these investigations, students gain awareness of the subtle, sometimes unpredictable effects of communication, while also adding to the knowledge base of their future profession.

Active participation by students is a defining characteristic of the projects carried out within Message Design, as is the common use of a two-step methodological approach. In the first step, students explore the different communication strategies currently being used, whether through interviews with professionals or content analyses of messages gathered in the field. In the second step, they evaluate the effectiveness of different message strategies with a controlled experiment or focus group with members of the target group. A few examples illustrate this approach best.

At the Hotel Management School Maastricht, the focal topic in Message Design projects is communication during service recovery. Because services in the hospitality industry are produced and consumed at the same time, service failures are unavoidable (Becker, 2000; Hoffman & Chung, 1999). When a failure occurs, the service provider must attempt a service recovery. Previous research has shown that during this attempt, both compensation and communication are important. Appropriate compensation enhances the perception of *distributive justice* on behalf of the customer, and communication increases perceptions of *interactional justice* (Del Río-Lanza, Vázquez-Casielles, & Diáz-Martin, 2009; Fisher, Garrett, Arnold, & Ferris, 1999; Goodwin & Ross, 1992). In practice though, the communication aspect of service recovery (i.e., the *form*) often gets neglected. Therefore, three groups of Hotel Management students (thus far) have conducted research into effective message strategies for service recovery as part of their Management Project modules. The results have been very satisfying, not just for the students and the Research Centre but also for the international hotel chain that participated in two of the projects. Later this month, the outcomes of the second project (Brand et al., 2015) will be presented at the EuroCHRIE conference in Manchester; the results of the first (Houweling et al., 2013) already have been presented at an international symposium organized by the Association for Business Communication in 2014.

In the Department of Translation and Interpreting, Gys-Walt van Egdom is starting a line of investigation into post-edited machine translation (PeMT). Technological and statistical advances have considerably improved the quality of machine translations, but in most cases, intervention by a human post-editor is still necessary (Jiménez-Crespo, 2013). Such an intervention can take different forms: Sometimes, post-editors restrict themselves to very basic operations, such as splitting long sentences in two or removing very conspicuous ambiguities from the text. In other cases, they completely revise the machine translation to tailor it optimally to the needs of the target audience. The latter type requires more effort than the former, and it is also more expensive. Table 3 provides examples (in Dutch) of minimal and extensive post-editing applied to the same machine translation, as well as the English source text, which comes from a software manual.

For companies that use translation services, it often is not clear what degree of post-editing is required given the type of text and preferences of the target audience. According to Mossop (2014), this confusion often leads to tensions between translation agencies and the companies that use their services. Furthermore, it leaves the client companies susceptible to the risk of being perceived as uncaring, because they have failed to invest in an appropriate translation for their international customers. From an international relationship management perspective, therefore, good insights into the effects that different types of post-editing have on text evaluations by the target audience are critical. Again, students are actively involved in this investigation: They will create four versions of a machine-translated text, with varying levels of post-editing applied. After presenting these versions to members of a target audience, they will be responsible for analyzing the experimental results. By doing this, they will help future assignment providers make better informed decisions about the translation and post-editing services they require.

You can open a new change proposal from the menu option New > Change management > Change proposal or via the overview page of the Change management process under the heading 'New'. You can see shortcuts to create a new change proposal, change request, or Template wizard or Meeting card. It is possible to make change proposals from other cards in TOPdesk. You can read more about submitting change proposals from other cards in chapter 5. The Change proposal card is divided into a number of tabs which will be handled below.	U kunt een nieuwe wijziging voorstel van menuoptie Nieuwe > Change management > Wijzigen voorstel of via de overzichtspagina van het Change management proces in de rubriek 'Nieuw'. U kunt snelkoppelingen zien voor het maken van een nieuw gewijzigd voorstel, of sjabloon wizard en Meeting card. Het is ook mogelijk om veranderingen door te voeren om voorstellen uit andere kaarten in TOPdesk te maken. U kunt meer lezen over het indienen van voorstellen wijzigen van andere kaarten in hoofdstuk 5. Het voorstel Wijzigen kaart is verdeeld in een aantal tabbladen die worden hieronder behandeld.	U kunt een nieuw voorstel voor een wijziging doen via menuoptie New > Change management > Change proposal of via de overzichtspagina van het Change management-proces in de rubriek 'New'. U kunt snelkoppelingen zien voor het maken van een nieuw voorstel tot wijziging, de sjabloon-wizard en de Meeting card. Het is ook mogelijk om wijzigingen voor te stellen vanuit andere kaarten in TOPdesk. U kunt meer lezen over het indienen van voorstellen tot wijziging vanuit andere kaarten in hoofdstuk 5. De Change proposal-card is verdeeld in een aantal tabbladen die hieronder worden behandeld.
English source text	**Dutch machine translation after minimal post-editing**	**Dutch machine translation after extensive post-editing**

Table 3 - Examples of minimally and extensively post-edited machine translations in Dutch, including the English source text

The increasing popularity of storytelling, as noted previously, is of particular interest to the Department of European Studies at Zuyd, which aims to produce graduates with expertise in international strategic communication. On behalf of the department, Luis Alfredo Pérez Salazar is currently developing a framework to analyze the stories and myths that companies use to share brand information with their customers. The research he has conducted so far has revealed that companies can choose from several basic plots, such as *overcoming the monster*, *rags to riches*, or *the quest* (Booker, 2004). If they decide to go a step further and build a myth around their brand, firms also need to think about the role the brand will assume: Will it be the hero of the story or the hero's mentor? After finalizing this framework, Pérez Salazar will investigate whether international brands tell unique stories in different European countries or apply the same narrative template across cultures. In November, he will be joined by two fourth-year European Studies students, who will be writing their bachelors' theses about this topic.

Svenja Widdershoven's doctoral research also can be classified under Message Design, because it investigates how service employees influence the emotions of customers with whom they communicate through social media. In interviews with service employees who specialize in social media communication, Widdershoven has found that they are very aware of the actions they can adopt to appeal to the customer. By showing empathy, making jokes, and using phrases like "you are *very* welcome" or "have a *very* good day," they seek to elicit positive emotions from customers. As mentioned earlier, one of her experiments has shown that positive emoticons (☺) in electronic conversations have similar effects. In the remainder of her PhD project, Widdershoven will look even more closely at the dynamics of the contagion process by using a measuring device, the Perception Analyzer, which allows participants to indicate their attitudes or emotions on a moment-to-moment basis. She also will investigate the impact of related variables, including peer emotions, medium richness, and familiarity between the sender and the receiver.

To create a platform for disseminating the findings from these different Message Design projects, the Research Centre is actively participating in founding the Centre for Contemporary Writing (CCW) in Maastricht. This joint initiative with Maastricht University's Faculty of Arts and Social Sciences aims to bring together regional expertise in the fields of writing, digital media, and effective communication. By organizing thematic events and offering tailor-made writing courses to professionals, the CCW will make this expertise more widely accessible to the community.

Within the CCW, Hilde Hanegreefs is developing the so-called *Quick Scan*, an audit tool for organizations to identify the main strengths and weaknesses of their written communication. Effective written communication (another example of *form*) is critical for building trust, informing stakeholders, and influencing public opinion. The Quick Scan combines quantitative and qualitative methods to generate research-based writing and communication advice in a relatively short time span. The output is an advisory report for the client, with the potential for further follow-up or training.

Figure 5 provides an overview of all the current projects in which our Research Centre participates. Although some projects fall exclusively in the domain of either professional competencies or communication strategies, others focus on the intersection between the two.

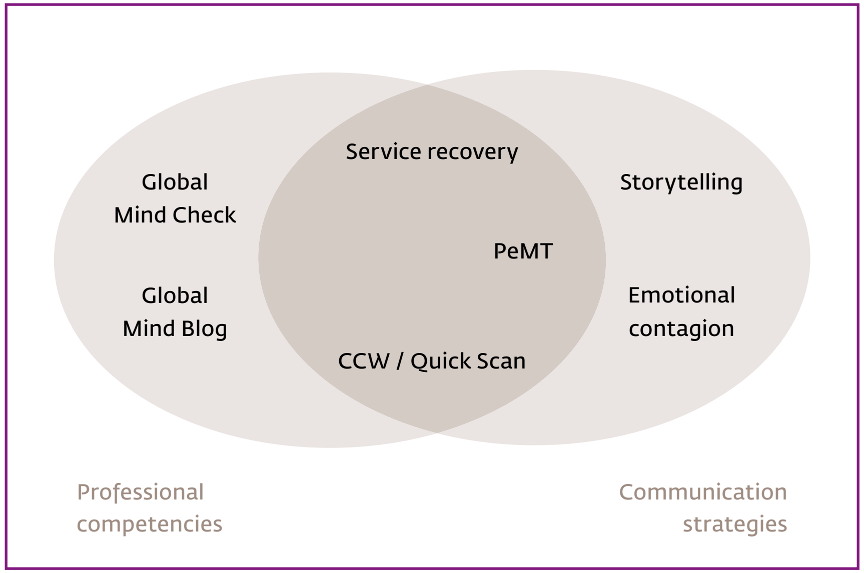

Figure 5 - Overview of current Research Centre projects, organized by domain

Added value for stakeholders

As a Research Centre in a Dutch University of Applied Sciences, we have many stakeholders. Students, lecturers, professionals, and companies all need to benefit from our activities, whether directly or indirectly. In this section, I describe how we try to ensure this outcome.

For students, we offer extensive opportunities to gain practical experience in conducting research that is relevant for their future professional field. Annually, approximately 80 students from different departments participate in research projects initiated by our Research Centre. In some cases, they write their bachelor's thesis about one of our research topics; in others, they assist in collecting and analyzing data for an external assignment provider. Our philosophy when working with students as researchers is that doing research should be stimulating, not scary. Before they start a project, many students have misconceptions about research that can be highly counterproductive if not challenged by the project supervisor. For example, students expect research projects to be highly structured and linear; in reality, it is often necessary to make changes to the original plan in light of new evidence. Supervisors in the Research Centre reassure students that such shifts are normal and do not mean that valuable time has been wasted, because exploring what eventually turns out to be a dead end can also lead to a better understanding of the research problem.

Another common misconception is that any imperfection in the research design or its implementation renders the entire project useless. As any experienced researcher knows, perfection in research is unattainable, especially when humans are involved. Instead, the goal should be to optimize the validity and practical utility of the research, given the time and resources available. Supervisors can help students achieve this optimization by helping them avoid basic methodological mistakes while also stimulating them to find creative solutions to the practical problems that occur in every project.

In addition to taking part in research projects, students benefit from some of the measurement tools that we have developed, most notably the Global Mind Check. Furthermore, the knowledge that our researchers absorb and create while working for the Research Centre gets incorporated into their courses and guest lectures, so students are constantly exposed to the latest insights from the fields of cultural psychology, persuasive communication, and online marketing, to name but a few.

For lecturers who supervise student research projects, we organize courses on research methodology and statistics for the social sciences. Thus far, approximately 90 colleagues have taken part in our courses, designed to both make them more effective supervisors and stimulate their interest in research. We also share the outcomes of our own research with lecturers, mostly through internal events such as Knowledge at Work (KIB) and tailor-made seminars and workshops for different faculties and departments.

The ultimate "proof in the pudding" regarding the value of our activities lies in the degree to which they help professionals and companies build better relationships with international stakeholders. To enhance the practical utility of our research, we investigate not just *what* companies should do (e.g., invest in employee intercultural competence, influence customer emotions) but also *how* (e.g., by periodically monitoring developments, inserting emoticons into Twitter conversations). As Heath and Heath (2008) point out, answers to *what* questions often fail to make an impact, because they simply reflect common sense. What is more interesting from a practical perspective, is hearing about concrete experiences that underlie a particular recommendation or seeing a specific example of a message that has had a positive effect in an experiment.

How do we ensure that the outcomes of our projects find their way to practitioners and entrepreneurs? In addition to publishing in professional journals, we take an active role in creating platforms for knowledge dissemination, such as the Centre for Contemporary Writing (CCW). By organizing events, offering writing courses, and conducting Quick Scans, we hope to make a positive contribution to the communicative competence of professionals and companies in the region.

A shortened version of the Global Mind Check, already tested with a selection of staff members and external relations at Zuyd, also will be made available for professionals and organizations with international ambitions. By doing so, the Research Centre hopes to add to the international competitiveness exhibited by businesses and knowledge institutions in the province of Limburg.

What's next?

As a summary to this lecture, I present a number of interesting new research avenues that we have identified. Beyond realizing the previously mentioned ambitions for our current projects, exploring these avenues will be our main priority in the coming years.

First, we plan to delve deeper into other professional competencies that might make a difference in intercultural interactions. The most obvious candidate is *linguistic competence*, which has been shown to reduce anxiety and enhance positive feelings among customers (Hoefnagels, 2014). Our involvement in the Euregional IntercCom and TIComKMO projects has provided some insights into the importance of this competence, but a lot remains to be discovered. In addition to evaluating tools and strategies that can enhance linguistic competence in professional situations, we hope to investigate the interplay of language skills with other competencies, such as intercultural and emotional competence.

For Message Design, it would be interesting to create lines of research related to other departments at Zuyd that devote attention to communication in their curriculum (e.g., Oriental Languages and Communication, Commercial Management, Facility Management, Communication and Multimedia Design). I cordially invite communication lecturers working in these or other departments to discuss any research ideas they may have with us.

Second, as you may have noticed, most of our research projects feature a clear international dimension, either because they include an explicit cross-cultural comparison or because they study interactions in a setting that is inherently international. In some projects, such as the Quick Scan and Svenja Widdershoven's doctoral research, the international dimension has not been incorporated yet, mainly because they seek to explore and understand the focal phenomenon within a single cultural or linguistic context first. In the future, we aim to broaden the scope of these projects to do justice to the strong international orientation of our Research Centre.

Third, a suggestion for future research contained in Ankie Hoefnagels's thesis called for investigations of customer-to-customer interactions (CCIs). A service experience is influenced not only by the performance of service employees but also by the behaviors of fellow customers. As most modern consumers are only too aware, it can be annoying to be confronted with other people who are using the same facilities and service but in a completely different or "wrong" way. Although CCIs once were considered beyond the service provider's control, scholars have identified some strategies that managers might use to mitigate their potential negative impacts (Epko et al., 2015; Johnson & Grier, 2013). One example received widespread media attention recently: Landal Green Parks issued a notice to Dutch and German guests about the presence of a large number of Arabic guests, whose habits and rituals might differ from their own. In this case, communication was used to influence the expectations of the Dutch and German guests, but as Epko et al. (2015) point out, strategies such as separation, facilitation, or mediation also might be effective.

For our Research Centre, this research topic offers the perfect complement to our existing portfolio, in that it already encompasses interaction, form, and emotion. The successful management of CCIs is crucial to maintain fruitful relationships with culturally diverse customer groups. Moreover, it is a delicate issue that requires substantial intercultural competence on behalf of managers and employees, as well as a well-considered, carefully devised communication strategy. That's why we decided to conduct our first experiment on customer-to-customer interaction here today. Thank you for your willingness to participate!

Fourth, we are very interested in developments taking place at the newly formed campus for Business Intelligence and Smart Services (BISS) in Heerlen. This interest might seem surprising, given the doubts I voiced earlier about data-driven CRM. But these doubts should not be taken to signal questions about the potential usefulness of data for building relationships; rather, they reflect my belief that the data currently being used are too restricted, because of their exclusive focus on "content." Furthermore, I am convinced that automated interactions with customers can only be successful if their designs pay sufficient attention to form and emotions. The foundation of the BISS campus thus provides an interesting opportunity to push the boundaries and discover if intimacy can also be created in interactions with limited human intervention from the service provider. If nothing else, this venture will provide us with an even greater understanding and appreciation of the human capacity for building intimate relationships.

Acknowledgments

Following this elaborate presentation about what makes relationships special, it is only fitting to acknowledge the many relationships that have added value to my life, both personally and professionally. I owe a great deal to a great number of people; today, I especially express my gratitude to:

- My predecessor José Bloemer, for bequeathing me an extraordinary Research Centre, continuously supporting me, and, most of all, being such a warm and caring person;
- The Board of Directors at Zuyd, Jeanette Oostijen, and the members of the selection committee, for putting their faith in me;
- José Mastenbroek, Robin Sterk, and Yvonne Cransveld, for allowing me to start my career at Zuyd almost nine years ago;
- Joost Schilperoord, Mirjam Ernestus, and Harald Baayen, for providing me with the best scientific upbringing a researcher could wish for;
- My colleagues at the Faculty of International Business and Communication, for ensuring that I look forward to going to work (almost) every single day;
- Mohammed Khalil, for sharing his practical knowledge on international relationship management and introducing me to numerous useful terms and concepts;
- All the faculty deans and professors at Zuyd, for creating such a welcoming and cooperative atmosphere;
- The members of our Advisory Board, for being supportive and critical at the same time;
- The Marketing and Communication department, the staff of the Teaching Hotel, and especially Leila Medjadji, for all the hard work they put into the organization of this event;
- Ankie, Armand, Barbara, Geer, Gys-Walt, Hilde, Jacqueline, Luis Alfredo, and Svenja, for being such a talented and inspiring group of researchers. It might sound cliché, but it truly is an honor to serve you;
- My family, for being amazing;
- Hanna and Pim, for reminding me every day that I will never be able to create anything that is more beautiful and more valuable than they are; and
- Last but not least, Peggy, for sixteen years of love, laughter, dedication and teamwork. And most of all, for allowing me to be my absent-minded self during the months I was preparing this lecture. I hope you liked it (the lecture, that is ;-)).

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Curriculum Vitae

Dr. Mark Pluymaekers was born in 1980 in Meerssen, the Netherlands. He obtained his bachelor's degree in Oriental Languages and Communication from Zuyd University of Applied Sciences, his master's degree in Communication Sciences from Tilburg University, and his PhD in Psycholinguistics from Radboud University Nijmegen. In November 2006, he returned to Zuyd to work as lecturer in communication at the Faculty of International Communication (now FIBC).

In 2009, he joined the newly formed Research Centre for International Business and Communication, where he supervised PhD candidates, conducted research into crisis communication, and tried to build a bridge between the Research Centre and the different departments of the faculty. In September 2014, he succeeded Prof. Dr. José Bloemer as the head of the Research Centre, which in the meantime had been renamed International Relationship Management.

Mark's research interests include persuasive communication, professional communication skills, and quantitative research methods. His scientific work has been published in journals such as *Phonetica*, *Journal of the Acoustical Society of America*, and *International Business Review*. In 2011, his textbook on presentation skills for students in higher education (*Overtuigend Presenteren*) was published by Coutinho.

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Colophon
Author Mark Pluymaekers
Editor Elisabeth Nevins Caswell, Effectual Editorial Services
Basic design Zuiderlicht, Maastricht
Design Lücker Design, Sittard
Printed by Schrijen-Lippertz, Voerendaal

ISBN: 978-94-62287-04-4