Perceived Usefulness of Various Types of Customer Feedback Viewed by Managers of SMEs in the Czech Republic

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Abstract
The article consists of preliminary research on different approaches to customer feedback on a product and its perceived usefulness. The research was conducted by sending a web questionnaire to selected managers of SMEs. The results show that there is a statistically significant positive perception of customer feedback with a positive influence on product improvement and marketing communication by managers of SMEs based in Prague or Brno. The second part of the research found that from all examined customer feedback approaches, only the social media approach is not perceived as (positively) useful by managers of SMEs. The final part of the research found that there is a statistically significant correlation between the results of the question "Does customer feedback improve your product?" and the perceived usefulness of every individual customer feedback. To calculate the results, the One-Sample Wilcoxon Test was primarily used along with Pearson´s correlation which was used to identify correlations between selected variables.

1 Introduction

In the current hyper-competitive environment, the customer has never been as important as it is nowadays. Contemporary approaches in product design and innovation are centred on customers and their needs (Olsen, 2015; Krug & Matcho, 2010; Sharon & Gadbaw, 2016; Osterwalder et al, 2010; Goodwin, 2009; Nunnally & Farkas, 2017).

Petri & Jacob (2016) add that customers are also important in co-creating process. Bulsara & Thakkar (2016) argue that customers provide value to the company not just by buying the product but also through feedback leading to innovation and improvements. Therefore, customer feedback is utterly essential in product management within the company. This applies not only to large companies but also for small and medium entreprises.

Customer feedback is ubiquitous in companies which are trying to maximise their profits through product improvement and therefore growth of sales. Furthermore, it is not only true in the for-profit world, but for non-profit organizations as well (even though only 13% of them use customer feedback as a top source of insight for improving products) (Twersky & Reichheld, 2019). Oelke et al (2009) add that in general, customer feedback is underutilized - even though it is essential to the success of a business.

From the current work it is evident that customer feedback plays important role in the current management of the companies. The article is trying to examine to which extend managers of small and medium enterprises perceive customer feedback as useful and to which extend these managers perceive that customer feedback has positive influence on the improvement of products and marketing communication.

Moreover, because there are many different approaches how to gather customer feedback, the article is focused on the answering the question to which extend is general view on the customer feedback usefulness correlated with the individual customer feedback approaches.

The article is focused on the management of small and medium entreprises as SMEs are important part of the economy in the most of the countries in the world. The increasing innovation and competitiveness of small and medium entreprises are cornerstone to any economy. The SMEs have (in general) more potential in their flexibility in terms of developing a product and they are more competent to implement changes faster than large companies. Worku, Z. (2019) add that especially in small entreprises product involvement is vital factor that affect customer loyalty.

Therefore, the research is based on the data which are gathered from managers of SMEs based in the selected large cities (Prague and Brno) in the Czech Republic.

2 Current State of the Solved Problem at Home and Abroad

Rosestain (2016) explains the four-stage cycle of the customer feedback process – listen, interpret, act, monitor. The article is mainly focused on the first step, which is listening to your customers where the journey of receiving relevant information about the product begins. On the other hand, only listening to customer feedback on its own won't provide sufficient value (and benefits) as it is derived from the whole process, which is interpreting feedback, acting on the insights and letting customers know that their feedback helped improve the product. Fundin & Bergman (2003) add that the crucial part of customer feedback is the learning aspect, which should lead to the transition of knowledge.

The ability to acquire customer feedback is key for generating ideas for improvement of the product. The term product is viewed (for the sake of this article) as a physical product or service (Birch-Jensen et al, 2020). Figure 1 shows how the customer perception of quality is influencing improvements of the provider of the product. It shows that the interfaces can be both digital and human. Gill et al (2019) add that customer insight and ideas which are shared lead to innovation. Information gathered should be shared amongst team members of the company to help with further improvement of product.

Figure 1
Feedback interfaces connecting the customer's perception of quality and the provider's product improvement
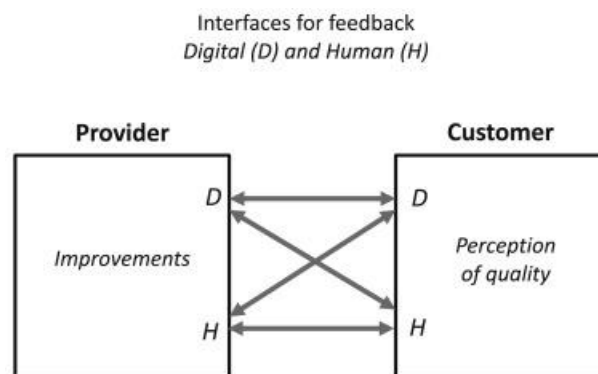
Source: Birch-Jensen et al (2020)

Fundin & Elg (2006) divide feedback into an active and passive form of gathering. Active feedback is when a company directly asks for feedback from its customers. On the other hand, passive feedback is when feedback on a company is available for customers, however it is initiated by the customers themselves.

Bhandari & Rodgers (2017) argue that customer feedback can have an indirect positive effect on brand awareness (i.e., on purchase intentions). Especially in the online world, any even minor cue about potential post-purchase problems can vastly influence brand trust and its

awareness. Urasova et al (2020) explain that managing a company's online reputation plays a significant role as it is based on customers who leave feedback on the Internet. Basu & Bhola (2015) add that close relationship with customers and company´s ability to use feedback to react and solve customers´ problems improve overall perceived image.

Mir Djawadi et al (2018) add that customer feedback is not always accurate. There can be situations where customers purchase something and provide dishonest feedback or (in more likely situations) customers do not have appropriate skills to judge product quality correctly. This inaccuracy is more common in selected industries such as hotel and restaurant services, cloud services (IT) or electronic devices.

Ringler (2021) add that customers often tell "white lies" which is to knowingly inflate their attitude. The current work suggest that some modes of communication encourage customers to tell "white lies" more than others. There are many different reasons why customers tend to inflate their attitude – such as altruism, conflict avoidance, self-gain and others. It is interesting that customers tend to tell more self-centred lies than other-oriented lies.

According to Rosestain (2016), the outputs of customer feedback are mostly as follows:

- Billing and accounting problems.
- Problems using the system.
- Suggestions for improving the product.
- Compliments or other positive remarks.

Novotová (2016) mentions two major approaches to gather customer feedback – social media and ad hoc surveys sent by email. Rosestain (2016) enhances this list by defining five essential qualitative feedback approaches on how companies can receive information about whether customers are satisfied and how to identify potential problems.

- Customer calls – calling customers to ask for feedback.
- Social media mentions – using social media (such as Facebook, Instagram etc.) to receive feedback.
- Ad hoc surveys – a one-time survey sent to several customers at once.
- In-product feedback surveys – asking customers for feedback during product use.

Rosestain (2016) adds additional details on the validity, delivery, retainability, usability, scalability and contextuality of these approaches. Figure 2 shows the determined characteristics for each approach.

Figure 2
Characteristics and which approaches to collecting user feedback work best

	Validity	Delivery	Retainability	Usability	Scalability	Contextuality
Customer calls		○	○	●		○
Social media mentions		●	●	●	○	○
Ad hod surveys	○	●	○	○	○	
In-product feedback surveys	●	●	●	●	●	●

● Very good ○ Good
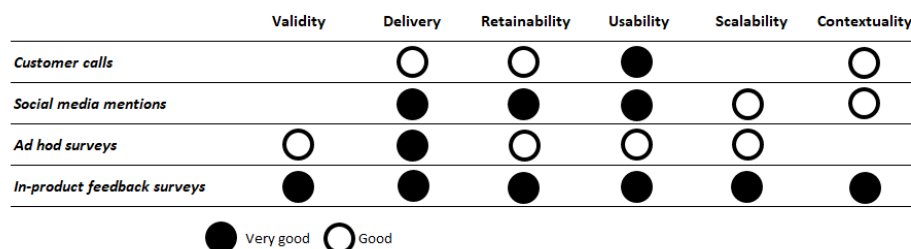
Source: Rosestain (2016)

Hertzum (2016) also adds usability testing to the list as a great source for companies to receive high-quality feedback.

2.1 Customer calls

Rosestain (2016) states that getting customer feedback by using customer calls is a great approach to creating a personal relationship with customers. The disadvantage is that the customer calls approach is expensive to perform. Moreover, many companies schedule calls with customers beforehand by email, which adds to the complexity and costs.

Caemmerer & Wilson (2010) add that customer calls have a low involvement in content from managers and employees and low satisfaction with knowledge gained through data.

In his thorough research Ringler (2021) states that some communication modes can determine customers´ likelihood to lie. Telephone modalities (and face-to-face modalities) are more likely to encourage customers to use lying behaviour. On the other hand, written feedback is less likely to encourage customers to tell lies. It is in correspondence with Rosestain (2016) who determine customer calls with worse validity than other customer feedback approaches.

2.2 Social media mentions

The internet and social media are currently integral parts of the current world.

Breckova & Karas (2020) introduce the social media as essential tools for contemporary companies. The authors state that "digital knowledge and competence are considered essential" not only for large companies but also for SMEs. Kazmaier & Vuuren (2020) explain that with the explosive growth of the Internet, social media has become an extraordinarily important source for customer feedback.

Currently, it is possible to acquire the opinions of a vast pool of customers, not only professional critics, which helps to gather relevant data from actual users of the product. Písař & Tomášková (2020) add that "companies using social media as a main component of their business, are active at using modern technologies and are declaring the importance of social networks to develop innovation potential" which (in other words) means that garthering data from social network has positive influence on innovation of the product. The drawback of feedback by using social media is firstly that reviews are written by users that are not necessarily actual customers, therefore the opinions are not necessarily valid and therefore the result can be questionable (Rosestain, 2016).

2.3 Ad hoc surveys

Rosestain (2016) describes ad hoc surveys as a scalable approach which could be much more efficient than customer calls and sharing the results within the company would be quite easy. The disadvantage is that ad hoc surveys are difficult to use for continual customer feedback on account of their ad hoc nature.

Ringler (2021) states that on one hand, written (or online) surveys are more likely to generate accurate and honest feedback, it is harder to form a relationship with customer which is a key component for customer loyalty.

2.4 In-product feedback surveys

Whether it is the introduction of a new product or service or its innovation, in all cases it is necessary to know the reactions of end customers to the product/service. This type of feedback is a tool to find out what users/consumers think about the product/service, what they want and need (typeform.com, 2021; zoho.com, 2021).

For surveys, the most frequently used is questionnaire survey, which asks, for example, about:

- − What do you think about the product?

- What would you improve on the product?
- What do you dislike about the product?
- How often do you use the product?
- Would you recommend the product to your friends? (Delighted.com, 2021; typeform.com, 2021)

These surveys provide valuable knowledge that can be used to create new products/services, grow business, change design, and last but not least, succeed in a competitive market (surveymonkey.com, 2021).

Product feedback gathered within a product interface is most likely the best approach for receiving relevant information from the view of validity, deliverability, retainability, usability, scalability and contextuality (Rosestain, 2016).

2.5 Usability testing

Tworek (2019) argues that user experience is more important in cases where the user is performing unique and complex tasks, therefore usability testing is a suitable approach for fully understanding customer views. Hertzum (2016) explains how usability testing is different from an interview (or other similar customer feedback). In usability testing, users interact with a product and give feedback relevant to their actual tasks. On the other hand, users talk about the experience with a product during an interview, but are detached from the concrete situation.

The output of usability testing is mostly in the form of qualitative insights. However, many studies recommend (in software development) to use a standardized IBM Computer Usability Satisfaction questionnaire to gather quantitative data which can be used for further statistical examination (for example in Pal & Vanijja, 2020 or Lewis, 1995).

Usability testing also has its drawbacks. Molich (2020) argues that the quality of feedback (and research) heavily depends on the skills and abilities of a moderator. Liu et al (2012) add that usability testing can be costly and the effort required to perform tests can be prohibitive.

Bastien (2010) adds that costs can be reduced by using the remote usability testing method.

2.6 The impact of GDPR

Since 2018, the regulation on the protection of personal data, which is generally known as the GDPR, has been in force. This Regulation applies in general to all types of online marketing that are not anonymous and refer to personal data. Names, addresses, e-mail addresses, telephone numbers are considered as a personal data (Netigate, 2021).

The company can only contact the consumer with his consent. Without his consent, the company may contact consumers only, for example, if the services or goods offered are directly related to a product or service already purchased from the company (mesec.cz, 2018).

According to the regulation, consent must be "freely given, concrete, informed and unambiguous" (Exin, 2020).

3 The aim and method of research

3.1 The aim of research

According to the literature review, the goal of the research was set to examine the perception of the usefulness of customer feedback in general, the examination of the perceived usefulness of individual customer feedback approaches and a correlation between the general view and individual approaches.

3.1 The method of research

The research is focused on selected managers of small and medium enterprises which are located in Prague or Brno.

The research methods were chosen to answer the following research questions.

1. Research question
The first research question is divided into two sub-questions:
   a. Do managers of small and medium enterprises perceive a positive influence of customer feedback for the improvement of their products?
   b. Do managers of small and medium enterprises perceive a positive influence of customer feedback for better marketing communication?

2. Research question
   a. To which extent do managers of SMEs perceive customer feedback as useful?

3. Research question
   a. Does a correlation between a general perception of customer feedback usefulness and the perception of the individual customer feedback approach exist?

The research was conducted by using the web questionnaire, which was sent to selected managers of small and medium enterprises in Prague or Brno. The sample was created by finding small and medium enterprises (by the definition of SMEs) which are located in Prague and Brno. The main source for this were the websites startujob.cz and startupMap.cz.

The research was conducted between October 2020 and January 2021 and was sent to 492 selected managers of SMEs. The number of managers that replied with the filled in questionnaire was 34 which makes the response rate 6.9%.

The questionnaire consists of 27 questions, which 16 were closed and 11 open and where 16 questions were mandatory and 11 voluntary. The closed questions occurred throughout the questionnaire, in the part concerning the general information about the subject, which is data that is very important for the evaluation, as well as in the part concerning the influence of the feedback. The 11 closed questions were accompanied by a follow-up question, which was open and served to voluntarily express the reason "why" they have an opinion on the influence of individual types of feedback, what is specific to their business. These open-ended questions serve primarily to better understand the answers, and thus better future evaluation of research. The average time to complete the questionnaire was estimated for 5 minutes.

The normality of the results was analysed by using Shapiro-Wilk test and the results was that the results were not normally distributed. Therefore, non-parametric One-Sample Wilcoxon Test was primarily used to answer the research questions along with Pearson´s correlation which was used to identify correlations between selected variables (with $p < 0.05$).

4 Results

Initially there were 34 respondents, three of them had to be rejected because they were answered from a large enterprise or company that wasn't based in Prague or Brno. Therefore, 31 respondents were used as data for the analysis.

In terms of sample composition, the respondents stated that 22% of them are producing a physical product and 78% of them are offering a service. 64% of the companies are based in Prague and 36% are based in Brno. In terms of the size of the company, 87% are small

enterprises and 13% are medium enterprises. 58% of the companies considered themselves to be a "start-up".

To the question "On average, how often do you gather customer feedback", the respondents answered that 45% of respondents gather customer feedback daily, 19% weekly or monthly and 36% quarterly or less frequently. The results show that managers take customer feedback seriously (at least in terms of collection).

The first part of the questionnaire was focused on the research question whether managers of small and medium enterprises perceive a positive influence of customer feedback for better marketing communication. The results are shown in Table 1, where the results of the questionnaire were analysed with the goal of answering whether customer feedback can significantly improve marketing communication and product. One-Sample Wilcoxon Test was used to determine whether the results are significantly different from the neutral response ($\mu 0 = 4$).

The results show that on the one hand, managers of SMEs in the region Prague or Brno see that there is a significantly positive perception of customer feedback that can improve the company's product. There is also statistically significant proof that managers of SMEs based in Prague or Brno think that customer feedback can improve marketing communication, however with a lower average score. An interesting insight would be a comparison of whether there is a different perception by managers of SMEs based in Prague and managers of SMEs based in Brno (or the division based on industry). However, due to the size of the sample, it would not provide relevant results.

Table 1
One-Sample Wilcoxon Test of the usefulness of the individual customer feedback approach

|	Average	St. Deviation	T	p
Does customer feedback improve your product?	6,32	1,35	17,5	0,000
Does customer feedback improve your marketing communication?	5,09	1,79	64,5	0,005

Source: own processing, 2022

In the following open question, the respondents also stated that customer feedback can significantly help a company with innovation, can find bugs and errors that their QA department missed and that customer feedback helps the company to focus on a customer's real needs.

The second part of the research was focused on the research question - to what extent do managers of SMEs perceive individual customer feedback approaches as useful?

Figure 3 shows on the box-plot chart that most of the results (from 1 to 7) are oscillating around the neutral response (4), therefore the box-plot chart is not sufficient to determine whether the results are significantly positive or negative in terms of the perceived usefulness of individual customer feedback approaches. Moreover, the standard deviation of the results shows that the managers' responses vary significantly.

Figure 3

Perceived usefulness of individual customer feedback approach
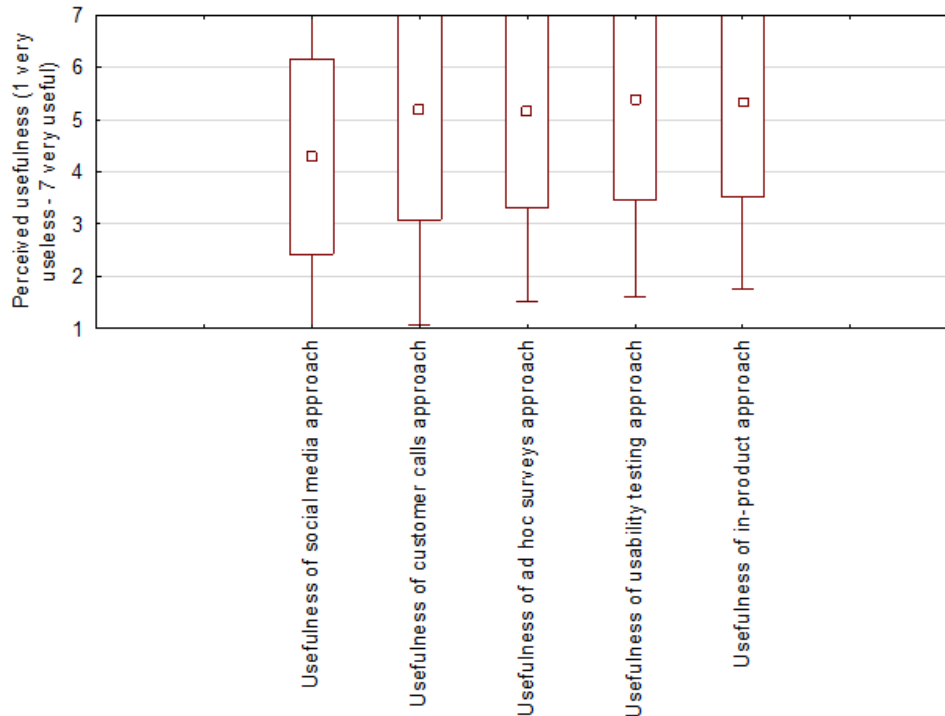
Source: own processing

For further examination the results (shown in Table 2) was again analysed by One-Sample Wilcoxon Test where it was tested whether the values are significantly different from neutral answer (i.e. 4). The results demonstrate that most of the types of customer feedback are considered as statistically significantly useful to the managers of SMEs based in Prague and Brno with the only exception being the perceived usefulness of the social media approach.

Table 2

One-Sample Wilcoxon Test of the usefulness of the individual customer feedback approach

	Average	St. Deviation	T	p
Usefulness of social media approach	4,29	1,86	120,5	0,399
Usefulness of customer calls approach	5,19	2,10	79	0,014
Usefulness of ad hoc surveys approach	5,16	1,86	40	0,005
Usefulness of usability testing approach	5,38	1,93	65	0,002
Usefulness of in-product approach	5,32	1,81	47,5	0,001

Source: own processing, 2022

The third part of the research was focused on answering the third research question i.e. does a correlation exist between the general perception of customer feedback usefulness and the perception of the individual customer feedback approach? To answer this question, the Pearson´s correlation analysis with $p < 0.05$ was performed.

The results presented in Table 3 show that there is a correlation between the results of the question "Does customer feedback improve your product?" and the perceived usefulness of each individual customer feedback approach. The strongest (positive) correlation is with the

perceived usefulness of the usability testing approach. However, the correlation is not strong (0,60).

On the other hand, in case of the question "Does customer feedback improve your marketing communication?" and the perceived usefulness of the customer feedback approach, no statistically significant correlation was found.

Table 3
Correlation between the general perception of customer feedback usefulness and the perception of the individual customer feedback approach

	Usefulness of social media approach	Usefulness of customer calls approach	Usefulness of ad hoc surveys approach	Usefulness of usability testing approach	Usefulness of in-product approach
Does customer feedback improve your product?	0,358	0,399	0,535	0,603	0,541
Does customer feedback improve your marketing communication?	0,270	0,074	0,115	0,104	0,225

Source: own processing, 2022

According to the results, the conceptual framework was presented in Figure 4, where different approaches are clearly shown including their p significance and average score of perceived usefulness by managers of SMEs in Prague and Brno.

Figure 4
Conceptual framework of the individual customer feedback approach
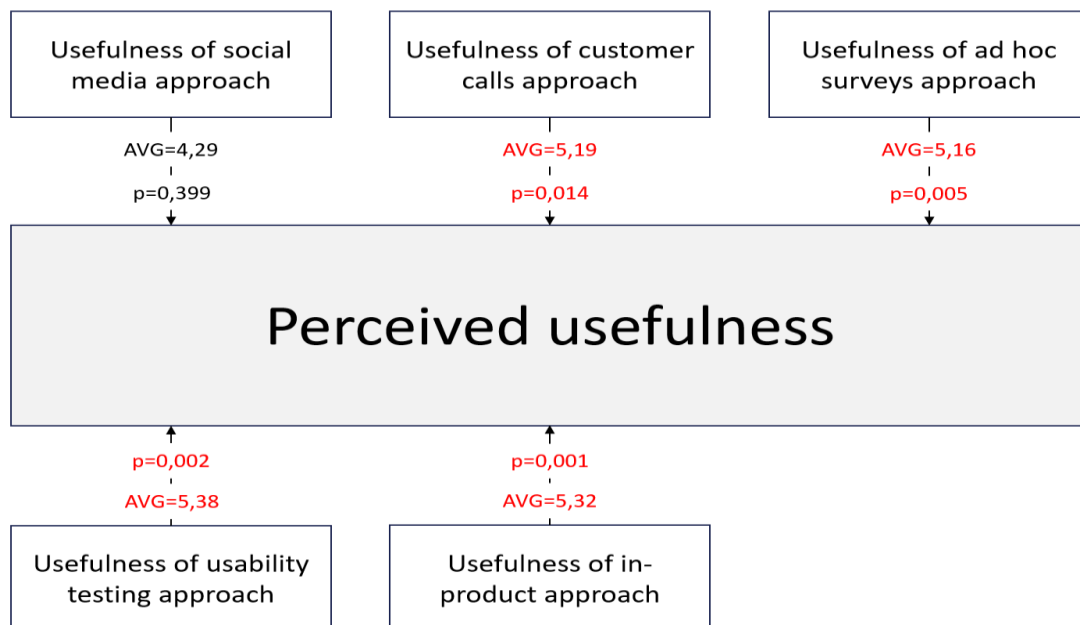
Source: own processing. 2022

5 Discussion

The results show that that there is a significantly positive perception of customer feedback that can improve the company's product by managers of SMEs in the region Prague or Brno. This is in agreement with Birch-Jensen et al (2020) who states that customer feedback is key for generating ideas for improvement of the product or service.

Respondents also state that cutomer feedback is perceived that it has positive influence on marketing communication which is also supported by Bhandari & Rodgers (2017) who argue that customer feedback can have a positive effect on brand awareness (i.e., on purchase intentions).

Rosestain (2016) argues that the important types of customer feedback for the company are customer calls, social media mentions, ad-hoc surveys, and in-product feedback surveys. The results are not able to support the statement whether those types are important for companies (because the research was focused on percieved usefulness), however from the results it is possible to state that social media mentions are not statistically significantly percieved as useful in contrast to the rest of the types of customer feedback.

The article also focused on the correlation between percieved usefulness of particular types of customer feedback and perception whether respondents agree that customer feedback can lead to improvement of company's product and marketing communication. There was no similar literature found on this topic, therefore it cannot be compared with another foreign research.

6 Conclusion

The aim of the article is to examine customer feedback in general and its perceived positive influence on product improvement and marketing communication by using preliminary pilotage research performed on the managers of SMEs in Prague and Brno. Moreover, the research is focusing on the individual approaches in terms of perceived usefulness and its correlation with perceived influence on product improvement and marketing communication.

Customer feedback plays a major role in contemporary product management within every company. The literature review suggests that customers provide value to a company not just by buying the product, but also through feedback leading to innovation and improvements. Moreover, customer feedback is an essential source for product innovation including idea generation. The literature also identifies several possible approaches for gathering feedback from customers - customer calls, social media mentions, ad hoc surveys and focus groups, in-product feedback surveys and usability testing.

The research was performed by using an electronic questionnaire and it was sent to managers of small and medium enterprises based in Prague or Brno in the Czech Republic. The results show that the answer to the first part of the study is that there is a statistically significant positive perception of customer feedback with a positive influence on product improvement and marketing communication by managers of SMEs based in Prague or Brno.

The second part of the research found that from all examined customer feedback approaches, only the social media approach is not perceived as (positively) useful by managers of SMEs. The final part of the research found that there is a statistically significant correlation between the results of the question "Does customer feedback improve your product?" and the perceived usefulness of every individual customer feedback approach especially in case of the perceived usefulness of the usability testing approach.

The conclusions which can be drawn from the results show that, according to preliminary study, the SMEs based in large cities which have positive perception of the role of customer feedback also have positive perception of its influence on product improvement. Also, it is possible to state that amongst these SMEs, a social media approach is not perceived as useful as other means of customer feedback.

The research was focused on small and medium enterprises based in Prague or Brno. It introduced some interesting insights for this sample, however, in future research, we would like to focus more on individual industries (as they were not considered in the current research).

Moreover, a comparison between companies based in Czech and surrounding countries (such as Germany, Austria, Slovak Republic, Poland) could provide an interesting view. The expected results could reveal remarkable differences between the small and medium companies in these countries.

There are several limitations of the research. Firstly, the paper is focused on the selected types of customer feedback listed by Rosestain (2016), although the theory gives many other types of customer feedback. This represented the effort to maintain clear boundaries within the focus of the study.

Despite the fact that the research is designed to be a preliminary pilotage, the smaller sample of respondents is a limitation of the study. However, this is designed to be addressed in the future research.

Moreover, the sample of respondents which the research is focused on is based on SMEs from large Czech cities, which can affect the results and conclusions. Nevertheless, the results, which are given by respondents are still able to provide interesting insights into the approaches of SMEs.

Acknowledgement

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