

# The Soft Skills as a Drivers of Customer Service in the Automobile Dealers

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## Abstract

This study aims to investigate the soft skills as a driver to customer service. And to see the customer service as an important organization's element. To this the research, a questionnaire was applied to 81 managers of the sales area of the automobile dealers. They are the ones who are directly with the collaborators who offers customer's expected service. To the data analyze and the results was using the stepwise multivariable regression in SPSS Statistics The findings revealed that Hospitality, Effective Communication, and Motivation are significant as a driver to customer service. Teamwork and Problem Solving were not significant.

## Keywords

Customer Service, Effective Communication, Hospitality, Motivation, Soft Skills.

## 1. Introduction

Customer service is a differentiator in a highly competitive market, and the human factor is responsible for putting this service into practice (Solnet et al. 2019). The team members have several soft skills that allow them to: generate experiences that the customer wants, increase sales, and promote loyalty towards the organization (Heskett et al. 2008). The service approach in the organization has the purpose of satisfying the needs presented by the customer (Wagner et al. 2019). The service constitutes the fundamental experience where the contact between the organization and the customer occurs, this is known as moments of truth (Carlzon 1991). To keep or loose a prospect or customer depends on these interactions. It is necessary for organizations to view customer service as the essential factor where their existence and/or permanence in the market lie (Agudelo & Saavedra 2013).

Albrecht (1990) proposed the customer service triangle. In which he positions team members as one of the key elements within this model. The team members are those who represent the organization in the customer's experiences (Baker et al. 2010). They are the ones who can cause an emotional connection, a unique bond of warmth and trust. When team members achieve the human touch in the service experience, a competitive advantage of the business is guaranteed (Bowen 2016; Mody et al. 2019).

This is how soft skills in team members who are in direct contact with customers require special attention (Faizal et al. 2019). Heckman & Kautz (2012) quote the Collins English Dictionary in which soft skills are mentioned as qualities that do not depend on the knowledge acquired and are of relevant value in some positions. Soft skills are made up of common sense, the ability to deal with people, a positive attitude, and flexibility (Nickson et al. 2012). Hurrell (2013) defined soft skills as non-technical skills, nor related to the abstraction of reasoning, that is, they are interpersonal and intrapersonal skills, which enhance and improve the performance of team members. They are character traits, attitudes, and behaviors. Soft skills are the intangible and specific skills of the personality that determine the strengths of the leaders, facilitators, mediators, or negotiators of an organization (Savaneviciene et al. 2014). Those who have them can develop interpersonal relationships, increase job performance, and have better professional prospects (Robles 2012; Faizal et al. 2019).

Certain universities and studies carried out on executives previously investigated soft skills to find out which of them were important in the labor market. These include, among others: hospitality, teamwork, effective communication, problem solving and motivation (Robles 2012; Singh & Jaykumar 2019).

### 1.1 Objective

This article aims to analyze to what extent soft skills impact customer service. This study was applied in the automotive distribution sector, in team members of the sales area.

### 2. Literature Review

In this section each of the variables were defined according to the literature found and were the reference to develop the instrument that was applied in the research methodology. Customer service was defined as good treatment, understanding, willingness and determination to support the customer (Vega-Sampayo et al. 2020). To provide security, credibility, and trust at the time of interaction (Gonzalez et al. 2016). The understanding of what the customer expects, in such a way that satisfaction and quality of the service received is offered (Shin 2021). It includes unique interactions for the customer, with high differentiation and generating memorable experiences (Fornieles et al. 2014; Coste et al. 2017).

Of the soft skills proposed, the first one was hospitality, which was defined as the attitude of being helpful, empathy, attention, and warmth of the team member in dealing with the customer (Lolli 2013; Quinn 2013). Respond to the needs of the customer and satisfy them with professionalism, making them feel like a unique person through friendly treatment (Spowart 2011). The second soft skill was teamwork, which was defined as the ability to collaborate with others in carrying out tasks and achieving common goals for customer satisfaction (Mickan & Rodger 2000). It includes the sharing of information; distribution of tasks, roles, and responsibilities (Torrelles et al. 2011).

In the tourism, health, restaurant and university sectors, customer service has been highly valued. In these sectors, they have focused on seeking team members with communication and problem-solving skills (Singh & Jaykumar., 2019). These soft skills were considered for this study. Effective communication was defined as the ability to listen, ask questions, effectively express concepts, and ideas. Generate an assertive dialogue, using tools and/or methodologies to obtain, understand and appropriately transmit information in different situations with the customer (Coste et al. 2017). Problem solving was defined as the ability of team members to identify problematic situations in which it was necessary to respond to customers (Abramson, 2005). The ability was integrated by knowing how to clearly formulate the problem, generate alternative solutions, identify the viable solution, and make decisions to implement it effectively and efficiently (Almeida & Benevides, 2018). In addition, request the collaboration of superiors or team members if necessary and communicate the resolution of the problem to the customer (Mughal & Shaikh 2018).

The fifth soft skill of this study was motivation, it was defined as the degree of effort, enthusiasm, and commitment that team members are willing to exert in their work to satisfy their needs and those of customers (Curren & Marques 2009; Navarro et al. 2011; Haque, M. F. et al. 2014) It is the desire to achieve the task or goal in favor of the customer (Navarro et al. 2011; García & Forero 2014; Marulanda et al. 2014). When team members are motivated by their work, they show kindness, good spirits and provide a quality service that satisfies the customer (García & Forero, 2014; Tampubolon et al. 2021).

To validate the importance of these variables, a search of each variable in relationship with CS was conducted. Some of these relationships are shown in the table 1. In general, all relationships found from previous researches are claiming a positive impact for customer service; this includes HP, TW, EC, PS and MT as significant explanatory variables with relevant coefficients  $\beta$ 's. On the present work we are going to compare these results based on the insights obtained on the proposed model. Specifically, we will test that variables TW and PS have a non-significant impact on customer service.

Table 1. Relations between dependent variable (CS) and independent variables.

Authors	Variable	$\beta$	Significance
(Martin & Suarez 2006)	HP	.41	0.001
(Susskind et al. 2003)	TW	.70	0.01
(Edelman et al. 2002)	EC	.49	0.01
(Botía & Orozco 2012)	PS	.19	0.01
(Mohd et al. 2012)	MT	.25	0.01

Source: Author's own

### 2.1 Graphic Model

Once the literature had been reviewed, the graphic model was approach as it appears in figure 1. Subsequently, the hypotheses of the study were established. The verification was carried out through a multiple linear regression.

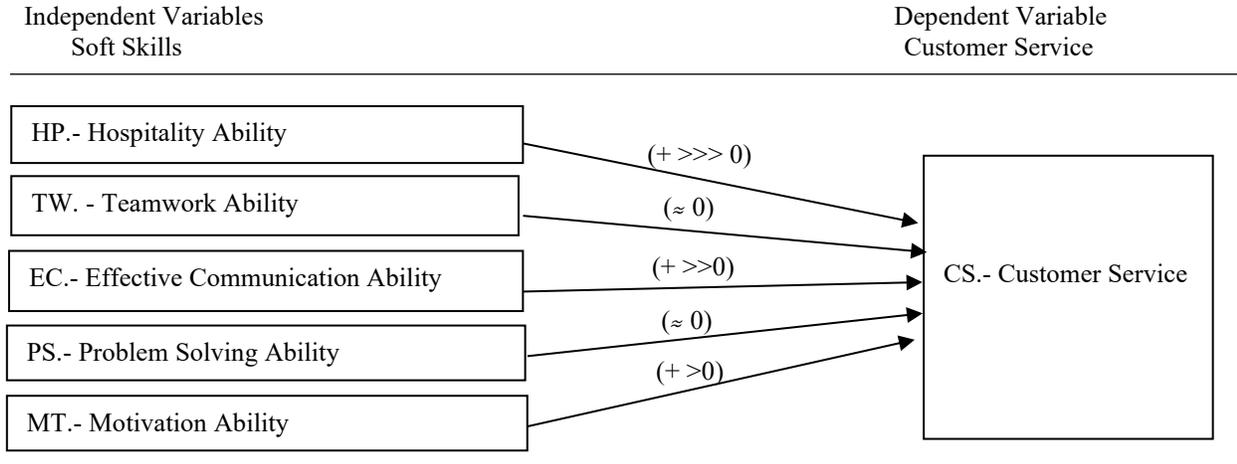


Figure 1. Graphic Model

Source: Author's own

From the approach presented in Figure 1, the following hypotheses were established according with different levels of impact defined for each relevant variable:

*H<sub>1</sub>: HP is the one with the greatest (i.e. >>>) positive impact on customer service.*

*H<sub>2</sub>: TW does not have a significant relevance on customer service.*

*H<sub>3</sub>: EC has a degree of impact on customer service after HP.*

*H<sub>4</sub>: PS does not have a significant relevance on customer service.*

*H<sub>5</sub>: MT has a degree of impact on customer service after EC.*

The significance of the study is framed in the next aspects: First, in the method was carried out. This study was applied in the automotive distribution sector, in the team members of the sales area. And finally, the importance of the human factor as the core of the research, in analyzing interpersonal skills in team members and their relationship with customer service.

## 2. Methods

After defining the variables, the instrument was developed and applied. The items that made up the instrument were selected and adapted from the empirical studies found in the literature review. Among these instruments analyzed were SERVQUAL and SERVPERF (Parasuraman et al. 1988), all of them validated with Cronbach's alpha greater than .8. The instrument validity was performed with expert Doctors in Methodology and Human Capital. Subsequently, statistical adjustments and expert suggestions were made (table 2) to integrate it into GOOGLE Forms for its application.

Table 2. Constitution and Reliability of the Instrument

Variable	No. of Items	Cronbach Alpha
CS	3	.939
HP	3	.899
TW	3	.944
EC	3	.801
PS	3	.850
MT	3	.884
Demographics	4	
Total items without demographics	18	

Source: Author's own (SPSS Statistics 21)

Parallel to the elaboration of the instrument, the population and the sample were determined. The population of commercial automotive distribution agencies in the Monterrey metropolitan area was 96 (AMDA 2019; ADANL 2019). The statistical formula was applied for a simple random sampling with finite population  $n = Nz^2(1-p)/(N-1) e^2 + z^2p(1-p)$  where,  $N= 96$ ,  $Z=1.96$ ,  $p=.5$ ,  $1-p=.5$ ,  $e=.05$ . Resulting in an n of 77 respondents, see table 3.

Table 3. Sample

Population Sample	Sample	No. of Surveys Received
96	77	81

Source: Author's own

### 3. Data Collection

The instrument was sent to each Sales Manager or Coordinator. They are the ones who are closely involved in the operation of the business and establish the sales strategies of the agencies. They are also the ones who know and observe the skills, behavior, and attitudes that Sales Consultants have to offer customer service. The instrument was sent to all sales managers or coordinators of the population. 81 were received, covering the sample and the data was processed based on this.

### 4. Results and Discussion

The proposed model for the investigation according to the hypotheses was  $CS = \beta_0 + \beta_1(HP) + \beta_2(EC) + \beta_3(TW) + \beta_4(PS) + \beta_5(MT) + u$ . The constructs were calculated using the Cronbach's alpha approach, in a confirmatory way. Once the data was obtained. The equation was estimated in SPSS Statistics through successive steps. The Model and ANOVA results were the coefficient of determination  $R^2 = .750$ , a Fisher test of 77.032 and a Durbin-Watson test of 1.505. Also, can be observed high coefficients  $\beta$ 's of the accepted variables in their impacts on CS. HP  $\beta = .374$ , EC  $\beta = .307$  and MT  $\beta = .287$  all of them whit significance  $< .001$ . The calculated T's values showed relevant levels of significance: HP 4.237, EC 3.302, and MT 3.48. The estimation error of 39%. The multicollinearity diagnosis was 3.064 it's indicated good acceptance range. The results of the model are shown below in the table 4.

Table 4. Model and Method

Models	Method	Incoming Independent Constructs	Statistics	Variable's status	$\beta$	T test	Condition Index	FIV	Sig.
Multivariate Regression	Confirmatory	HP=HP1, HP4, HP8	R <sup>2</sup> .750	HP accepted	HP.374	HP 4.237	3.064	HP 2.4	HP .000
		TW=TW2, TW5, TW6	F 77.032	TW non accepted	TW .001	TW .987		TW 1.372	TW .987
CS= $\beta_0 + \beta_1(HP) + \beta_2(EC) + \beta_3(TW) + \beta_4(PS) + \beta_5(MT) + u$		EC=EC1, EC2, EC3	Durbin	EC accepted	EC .307	EC 3.302		EC 2.662	EC .001
		PS=PS4, PS6, PS7	Watson	PS non accepted	PS -.024	PS -.297		PS 1.970	PS .768
		MT=MT1, MT3, MT6	1.505	MT accepted	MT .287	MT 3.48		MT 2.109	MT .001

Source: Author's own

The variables wasn't accepted was the TW and PS whit a  $\beta$ 's .001 and -.024 the significance was .987, .768, respectively. This according to the hypotheses of Figure 1. Graphic Model.

Finally, HP showed a higher impact than MT and EC. This validated the relevance of this ability in this study. MT and EC showed similarity in importance, the difference between them was (.02). Table 5 below shows the hypotheses raised and the synthesis of the degrees of impact of the variables towards the CS.

Table 5. Status of the specific hypotheses according to the results of the model

Independent variables: Soft Skills Result	Result
$H_{1+3+5}$ : HP > EC > MT Hierarchies of impact towards customer service.	Accepted
$H_{2+4}$ : TW, PS Do not have a significant relevance on customer service	Accepted

Source: Author's own

The table 6 shows the impact levels of the  $\beta$ 's and the significance of this study compared to the  $\beta$ 's and the significance of the empirical studies found. In the analysis of the table, there is only similarity in the degree of impact of EC towards CS.

Table 6. Degree of impact of the variables towards Customer Service of model vs previous studies.

Variable	Theoretical Frame Authors	$\beta$	Significance	Degree of Impact	$\beta$ of the study	Significance of the study	Degree of impact of the study
HP	(Martin & Suarez 2006)	.41	0.001	3	.374	.000	1
TW	(Susskind et al. 2003)	.70	0.01	1	.001	.987	5
EC	(Edelman et al. 2002)	.49	0.01	2	.307	.001	2
PS	(Botía & Orozco 2012)	.19	0.01	5	-.024	.768	4
MT	(Mohd et al. 2012)	.25	0.01	4	.287	.001	3

Source: Author's own

The demographic data of the sales team members for this study were obtained through four items referencing to gender, age, education, and geographic area. Table 7 shows the sum of each of the groups based on the corresponding demographic. When schematizing the results, it was observed in the investigation that the number of men and women was balanced. Also, that team members with an age equal to or greater than 36 years make up 62% and that there is a small number of team members whom their highest level of education is a high school diploma (16%). Regarding the demographic of the geographic area, they were segmented into two groups, area A made up of Monterrey and San Pedro, which are towns with high purchasing power, and are in the center of the Monterrey metropolitan area. This area is where the largest number of automotive agencies are concentrated. The towns of Cadereyta, San Nicolas and Santa Catarina were in Area B, which are further from the central area. The percentages of groups A and B are those

expected according to the concentration of agencies by area, 70% are in the group of area A, that is, in the most suburban and central municipalities.

Table 7. General demographic data

Demographics	Gender		Age		Schooling		Area	
	Men	Women	<36	≥36	≤ High School	≥ Bachelor's Degree	A	B
N	44	37	31	50	13	68	57	24
%	54%	46%	38%	62%	16%	84%	70%	30%

Source: O Author's own

The data of each demographic group of the study were processed in SPSS Statistics through multivariate regression with successive steps. The results are summarized in Table 8. For each iteration, the 5 independent variables were included. However, it was observed in Table 8 that the accepted variables were consistent with the significant variables of the model (Table 4), these variables were HP, EC, and MT. Within the results there were variations of these three variables in the impacts towards customer service according to the group. In most of the demographic results, 2 or 3 variables were significant, only the case of MT education was significant as the only variable for team members with a maximum education degree of high school.

Table 8. Impact of Soft Skills on Customer Service by Groups

Demographics	Group	R <sup>2</sup>	Accepted Variables	B	T test	P Value	Condition Index	FIV
Gender	M	0.701	EC	.488	3.794	.000	2.451	2.016
			MT	.416	3.666	.001		2.016
	W	0.895	HP	.565	5.265	.000	2.354	1.926
Age	<36	0.883	EC	.491	3.592	.001	3.125	2.849
			MT	.365	3.593	.015		2.849
	≥36	0.860	HP	.482	4.046	.000	2.890	2.339
			MT	.253	2.405	.026		1.862
Schooling	≤ High School	0.591	HP	.466	2.430	.033	1.538	1
			EC	.306	2.904	.005		2.829
	≥ Bachelor's Degree	0.873	HP	.383	3.896	.000	3.221	2.525
Area	A	0.878	MT	.295	3.042	.003	2.443	2.424
			EC	.441	4.867	.000		2.028
	B	0.876	HP	.472	5.355	.000	1.162	2.028
			MT	.867	8.501	.000		1

Source: Author's own

To verify the impact on CS for each group of demographics, the calculation was performed using a mean difference or t test for each variable. Table 9 shows the assumptions planted and the result of the calculations. According to the results. Just EC was compared for the gender. The significance was for the women vs. men. For the women, implies that their ability to listen and eye contact with the customer to understand and satisfy their needs has an important impact on CS, unlike men.

In this study, team members with an age of up to 35 years, the impact on CS is determined by EC and MT. Those who are older than 35 years, the significance is first in HP, then MT and EC. What reveals that they have a warm and attentive treatment towards customer more accentuated than the younger team members, this is how they impact the CS with this ability. By other hand, EC and MT have a higher impact in younger (<36) employees. The level of education in the car dealerships of this study, marked a significance HP since it is the only impact ability towards the CS of those who have a maximum High School degree versus the team members with a bachelor's degree. In those last the significance was in three variables (HP, MT and EC), that is, the more academic education they have, the more skills they can put into practice to offer better customer service. In the T test the greater significance and HP's impact to CS was in team members who have at least Bachelor's Degree.

And finally, in geographical areas, the degree of significance of soft skills in customer service also showed differences. In zone A, hospitality was significant in the first instance and effective communication in the second. In zone B, only motivation was significant. Zone A is where the largest number of agencies are concentrated and, they have greater purchasing power. That zone is grouped by the Monterrey and San Pedro cities. In the zone B, are the cities of San Nicolás, Guadalupe, Santa Catarina and Cadereyta, which are the furthest from the center of the metropolitan area. In zone A, employees have greater warmth and communication when providing customer service. And in Zone B greater push or impulse and they focus on achieving their goals and those of the clients, this is how they impact customer service.

Table 9. Assumptions tests on impacts by Groups

Demographic	Group	n	Accepted Variables	$\beta$	Typical Error	Assumptions	T test	P-Value	Status
Gender	M	44	MT	.416	.114	$EC_W > EC_M$	4.0476	.00001	Accepted
			EC	.488	.126				
	W	37	HP	.565	.107				
			EC	.485	.100				
Age	<36	31	EC	.491	.137	$EC_{<36} > EC_{\geq 36}$ $MT_{<36} > MT_{\geq 36}$	7.4161	.00001	Accepted
			MT	.365	.141				
			HP	.482	.119				
	$\geq 36$	50	MT	.253	.105				
			EC	.270	.119				
Schooling	$\leq$ Highs	13	HP	.466	.192	$HP_{\leq \text{Highs}} >$ $HP_{\geq \text{Bachelor}}$	.6375	.3814	Non-Accepted
	$\geq$ Bachelor	68	HP	.383	.980				
			MT	.295	.097				
			EC	.306	.105				
Area	A	57	HP	.472	.088	-	-	-	Does not apply
			EC	.441	.091				
	B	24	MT	.867	.102				

Source: Author's own

## 5. Conclusion

Through the investigation process, in this article it was possible to comply with the methodological phases as suggested by Creswell (2009) and Whetten (1989): 1.- the establishment of objectives and hypotheses. 2.- The literature review to deepen the theory and the establishment of the constructs. 3.- the design of the research instrument to collect the information. 4.-data collection and calculation. 5.-obtaining results and conclusions.

Car dealerships offer similarity in each segment in several domains: products, technology, safety, comfort, and prices. What makes the difference is the treatment of the customer (Gómez, 2011; Díaz et al. 2021). Through good customer service, He can come back for car maintenance or a buyback. At the automobile dealers the loyalty is generated when customers feel trust with the sales consultant. Advisors need to offer warm treatment during the sales process. Making them feel unique and important. Showing empathy and above all listening to them attentively to be able to interpret their needs and preferences. These last actions occur when the team member has certain soft skills.

The Hospitality (HP), Teamwork (TW), Effective Communication (EC), Problem Solving (PS) and Motivation (MT) are the sales collaborators soft skill's studied in this article to know their impact on customer service. The result shows the importance of three of these skills in the sales team members at automobile dealers: **Firstly**, that they have the skill of hospitality (HP) through an attentive, professional, and warm treatment. **Secondly**, effective communication (EC) through eye contact and active listening that leads them to interpret the needs, likes and preferences of the customer. **Thirdly**, the motivation (MT) to achieve their goals and that they like their activities, in a way that leads them to satisfy the customer. That's mean, it is confirmed for the automobile sales sector that the variables of Hospitality (HP), Effective Communication (CE) and Motivation (MT), are drivers of customer service, since relationships were significant and positive. TW, PS and CS were not getting a significant impact to the customer service. There are some reasons as the business field and management and leadership styles.

To complement this study, it is suggested: 1.- to continue deepening in other soft skills such as flexibility, self-confidence, sense of urgency and proactivity in the team members of the sales area of the automobile dealerships. 2.- to extend the research to other locations, waiting to see the behavior of the data and variables. 3.- to take these studies to other retail sectors to analyze the interpersonal skills of sales team members who are directly in contact with the customer, to know the level of impact of said skills on customer service. To build the employee's profile of sales automobile.

In the section on demographic groups made it possible to build a more precise profile of the sales team members who offer excellent customer service. It is recommended that 1.-these profiles and skills are seen in organizations from recruitment. 2.- can be develop a specific training program with these skills for team members who are already part of the organization. All mentioned before to offer better customer service. Understanding it as the differentiator of the organizations and the one who generates loyalty, satisfied customers, therefore, the permanence of the organization over time (Kotler et al. 2013).

### 6.1 Situational moment of the Investigation.

It should be noted that this study was carried out exactly at the beginning of COVID-19 in Nuevo León, which was at a significant moment in car dealerships. This had an effect not only on individual and collective behavior in the sales process and customer service. But also, before the process of the investigation itself. 44% of the surveys were applied and received before the pandemic, during this period the answer and reception was complicated, the estimated time was 3 to 4 weeks. By having the home office and being more collaborators online, answering and receiving questionnaires was easier. The remaining 55% were shipped and received in a response time of 1-2 weeks.

Regarding the sales process before the pandemic, it was 90% face-to-face, that is, in person. This allowed the collaborator's skills to be put into practice naturally or visually. However, when the surveys were applied, those 90% of employees were making a significant effort to sell remotely and / or digitally. So, the skills had to be accentuated. They made them a reality through calls or video calls, the contact with the client had to be closer and warmer, taking care not to overwhelm him (Bullemore-Campbell & Cristóbal-Fransi 2021).

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