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# What's important for trustful communication with customers?

An empirical analysis\*

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Trust is very important and essential for relationships. Such statements can be observed in scientific as well as practically-oriented journals. But what is trust and how can it be developed or strengthened? To date, information on this is rather vague. Therefore, this study analyses the different characteristics of trust in a business relationship. In order to answer the research question, an empirical survey has been developed here. The Kano-analysis is used as the methodological approach. It can be shown that three different dimensions of trust can be identified: basic factors are a prerequisite of any relation and have a fundamental character in long-term relationships. The customers expect such factors to be an unquestionable part of any business relationship (e.g. honesty), while attractive factors always strengthen the stability of trust in the relationship (e.g. sympathy). One-dimensional factors not only stabilise trust if implemented, but can cause the relationship to deteriorate if ignored (e.g. timeliness).

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## Introduction

The phenomenon of trust has long been neglected by economic theorists and has only recently attracted huge interest. In addition to the psychological and socio-psychological aspects of trust, an increasingly complex and uncertain business environment means that the importance of the economic aspects of trust and its role in reducing uncertainty has greatly increased (Kingshott and Rexha, 2003; Dietz, 2004). In order to be capable of acting and making decisions, individuals have to deal with the complexity arising from multiple possible courses of action. Trust is therefore a key concept in explaining new forms of close co-operation between companies (Das and Teng, 1998). There

\* Results of this study have been published in German in *Zeitschrift für Management* (2011), Vol. 6.

are numerous references in the literature of organisational theory and socio-economics to differing understandings of how to build and stabilise trust. Many aspects seem to be important, like open and honest communication between business partners or a sympathetic and well-known partner. But what counts the most? One aspect cannot be dismissed: communication, an instrument to strengthen and stabilise trust (Schlenker, Helm and Tedeschi, 1973; Deutsch, 1960; Giffin, 1967). But which communication style is decisive? This article will empirically examine the characteristics of trust within long-term business relationships to determine which factors concerning trustful communication are important to develop and strengthen trust. The article is structured as follows. First, there is a review of the literature on trust and communication research. Based on these results, the theoretical model is developed and then empirically analysed using the Kano-method. Finally, the results are given and the article closes with implications for research and management.

## **Theoretical and conceptual thoughts**

### *Literature review*

Although there are various methods of reviewing the literature (Cooper and Hedges, 2009; Fink, 2005; Mulrow, 1994), this article uses a five-step procedure following the phases of:

- (1) Problem formulation.
- (2) Literature research.
- (3) Literature evaluation.
- (4) Analysis and interpretation.
- (5) Presentation.

The first step deals with specifying the research question of the review; in the second step, the literature fitting the research question is investigated; an examination of the relevance of the chosen literature and the systematisation follows; before the literature is interpreted according to the research question; and finally, the results are presented. Regarding this article, the problem formulation (phase 1) has already been done. The literature research as second phase is carried out systematically, with a theoretical as well as empirical focus. The economics literature database 'Business Source Premier (EBSCO)' was used for support. In order to limit the research focus, the key words of 'trust and communication', 'communication to build or to strengthen trust', 'trustful communication' and 'marketing mix and trust' were used as search criteria. The superior term of 'relationship management' was also considered. Eventually, the results were reviewed, deleting those that had been falsely identified during the research (phase 3). In addition, only those studies that deal with trust and communication rather than communication alone, have been examined. The relevance of a certain study to this article was decided using the abstract, the introduction and the epilogue. In the fourth phase, the studies were critically reflected upon, taking into account the already existing studies. The results are presented later in this article (phase 5). There are a

multitude of empirical studies of communication research dealing with the essential factors influencing communication. Here though, the focus is upon communication quality, as the aim is to identify the kind of communication that mainly contributes to the stabilisation of trust within a business relationship. Various studies describe the ability of the supplier to design the communication within a business relationship in accordance with the expectations of the customers (Cunningham, 2010). In addition to these, all of the studies stating that trust is an essential aspect of the communication quality have been chosen for this analysis.

Another particular focus in this study is upon customer trust in retailers, which in this case is about the individual's trust in an organisation (Schoorman, Mayer and Davis, 2007). The research literature strongly agrees on the increasing relevance of trust (e.g. McEvily, Perrone and Zaheer, 2003). Normally, trust is defined in terms of personal trust, meaning a person's trust in other persons. Organisational trust is concerned with the trust relationships between people and organisations, such as public authorities, or institutions. Giddens (1990) expresses trust in organisations as being supported by the retailers' belief in the right principles or the customers' confidence in the fair and competent behaviour of organisations. Carneval (1995) has a very similar understanding of organisational trust, describing it as playing a major role in the reduction of social complexity. In situations where different actions are possible, complexity arises as there are usually many more paths of action than could possibly be followed (Luhmann, 1979). In order to maintain the capacity to act, a reduction of complexity is necessary (Luhmann, 1979). Trust, being the expectation that an organisation will behave in a trustworthy manner, reduces this complexity (Bachmann, 2000; Luhmann, 1979). This reduced complexity in terms of reduced room for decision leads to cognitive relief, but also causes risk (Bachmann, 2000; Deutsch, 1960). This is because trust is understood as an uncertain input of the trust giver (Mayer, Davis and Schoorman, 1995; Luhmann, 1979). The perception and evaluation of this risk through different risk and trust tendencies is highly subjective (Luhmann, 1979). According to the theory of perceived risk, trust results from the combination of the truster's perceived uncertainty concerning possible opportunistic behaviour on the part of the trusted entity, and the perceived meaning of the consequences (Rousseau and Sitkin, 1998; Martin and Camarero, 2008). The individual who trusts thereby shows willingness to be vulnerable (Mayer, Davis and Schoorman, 1995). Trust reduces subjective uncertainty and therefore also the perceived risk by replacing outer certainty and protective measures with inner certainty, through the expectation that the trust taker will engage in trustworthy behaviour (Mayer, Davis and Schoorman, 1995; Martin and Camarero, 2008; Luhmann, 1979. See also Das and Teng (1998) who see trust and control as independent mechanisms to reduce uncertainty). In this way, trust enables action despite perceived risks and often is the basis for the formation of social relations, such as business relationships (Bachmann, 2000; Martin and Camarero, 2008).

One of the major challenges regarding organisational trust is the question of what brings people to trust organisations. Why do customers trust a retailer? Rotter (1967), one of the first to engage in this topic, states that the expectation

Studies		Factors
Author (year)	Study focus	
O'Reilly 1982	Charity organisation	Accessibility
Swan et al. 1988	B2B seller/buyer	Accuracy
Anderson and Narus 1990	Großhändler/Hersteller	Actuality
Anderson and Weitz 1989	B2B electrical retailer	Adaptability
Anderson and Narus 1990	Distributor/producer	Appropriateness
Crosby, Evans, and Cowles 1990	Insurance agent/customer	Benevolence
Moormann et al. 1993	Market research institutes	Clarity
Ganesan 1994	Customer retail industry/retailer	Compassion
Morgan and Hunt 1994	B2B Automobile tyre industry	Competence
Booher 1995	-	Completeness
Mayer, Davis, and Schoorman 1995	Organisations	Consistency
McAllister 1995	Cooperation in organisations	Correctness
Mohr and Sohi 1995	B2B computer retail	Credibility
Dyer and Chu 2003	International supplier relationships	Ability to explain
Mohr and Spekman 1996	Cooperation producer/retailer	Honesty
Doney and Cannon 1997	B2B supplier/producer	Integrity
Mitchell, Reast and Lynch 1998	Management/employees	Needs-orientation
Thomas, Zolin and Hartmann 2009	Employees in the oil industry	Openess
Sharma and Patterson 1999	B2C financial services	Presentation of alternatives
Sengupta, Krapfel and Pusatani 2000	Sales staff	Relevance
Chomie and Burns 2008	Student nurses	Reliability
Johlike and Duhan 2001	Sales staff	Reputation
Nicholson, Compeau and Sethi 2001	Franchise holder	Resemblance
Celuch, Bantham and Kasouf 2011	Buyer-seller relationships	Sympathy
Frimann et al. 2002	Services	Timeliness
Brashers et al. 2003	Seller/Sales management	Understandibility
Johnson and Grayson 2003	International financial consultancy	
Ball, Coelho and Machas 2004	B2B financial services	
Sharif, Kalafatis and Samouel 2005	Electronics industry	
Ryu et al. 2007	Purchaser B2B	
Ebert 2009	Bank customers	
Ali and Birley 1998	New Ventures / Entrepreneurship	

Figure 1: Overview of the empirical studies of the literature review

of an individual concerning the trustworthiness of another is founded on the acceptance of a possible vulnerability and other trustful relationships. Other authors followed Rotter's lead (Kee and Knox, 1970; Lewis and Weigert, 1985; Colquitt, Scott and LePine, 2007). Organisational factors have also been tested to determine their influence upon trust, particularly when it comes to the actions of an organisation's management. Earlier research concentrates on certain areas of human resource policies, like the company's performance (Folger and Konovsky, 1989; Mayer and Davis, 1999) or systems of reward and compensation (Pearce, Branyiczki and Bigley, 2000). Those studies prove that fair and correct behaviour by management increases the trust employees have in them. Employee trust in their organisation can also be promoted in this

way, as Whitener (2001) shows. This examination follows the consideration that such management behaviour can increase the trust in an organisation (Searle, Weibel and Den Hartog, 2011). Figure 1 gives an overview of the literature review with the corresponding factors for analysis.

Research shows that communication and communicative activities are often assumed and also proven to have an essential influence on trust. However, the different studies vary considerably in their emphases with the interaction of communication and trust being only one out of many aspects they examine. Accordingly, there is a lack of specific criteria to define a communication that stabilises trust; furthermore, there is also diversity in the communications that strengthen and stabilise trust. Because the approaches in the literature that attempt to operationalise such communication are inconsistent, the authors will attempt to develop a new approach for operationalising trustful communication. The studies examined in this case have chosen very different approaches to analysing trust; there are also distinct variations in the factors they choose to analyse as possibly affecting trust and in the methods of analysis. In addition, while some studies explicitly analyse only a few factors, others examine a multitude of them. Here, mostly 'hard' factors such as the number or intensity of the partner of interaction and the power potential are addressed. Portraying 'soft' factors with a significant influence is less easy.

## Deduction of an analytical framework

On the basis of the studies examined in the literature, the factors chosen are included in the broad system of analysis which was identified in studies of

**Table 1: Analytical framework**

No.	Factor	No.	Factor
1	Actuality	11	Need-orientation
2	Adaptability	12	Openness
3	Benevolence	13	Presentation of alternatives
4	Competence	14	Relevance
5	Completeness	15	Reliability
6	Consistency	16	Reputation
7	Credibility	17	Resemblance
8	Explanatory	18	Sympathy
9	Honesty	19	Timeliness
10	Integrity	20	Understandability

communication and trust. Table 1 lists the factors of trustful communication used in the following empirical analysis.

## Empirical design

### *Method*

Following a literature analysis, a contextual study is carried out in order to verify the factors identified in the literature analysis. There have been three purchasing situations between seller and buyer and the behaviour of the seller has been analysed accurately. The participants are selected from the same sample, which has later been used for the examination and explained more closely. In order to increase the quality of the observations, despite the rather broad analytical framework, three observers have been employed. In the literature, Intercoder-Reliability, a high accordance of the observers, is seen to be evidence of the quality of an observation (Hughes and Garrett, 1990). Furthermore, errors of observation such as individual expectations, lacking achievement potential and willingness can be reduced using multiple observers (Topping, 1972; Punch, 2005). The evaluation of the results is carried out systematically as the observers record their impressions of the observation using the categories deduced from the literature. This system of categories is equivalent to the category system of a qualitative content analysis (Mayring, 2000; Bachiochi and Weiner, 2007; Hughes and Garrett, 1990). Those serve as a basis of the following Kano-examination.

The starting point for the subsequent development of the Kano-questionnaire is the factors identified by the literature analysis and verified by the accompanying observations. A questionnaire has been developed according to the factors of the Kano-analysis. The Kano-analysis categorises the factors of trustful communication according to their contribution to the stabilisation and strengthening of the level of trust between the interacting partners. The factors are divided into Basics, One-dimensionals and Attractives.

The Basics are formulated as compulsory: their non-fulfilment can lead to trust within the communication being destroyed. As the fulfilment does not create any additional communicative stabilisation or strengthening of trust, a non-linear (concave) correlation between the fulfilment of the Basics and the resulting trust within the communication is assumed. The Attractives are attributes not expected by the business partner, but that cause enthusiasm when existent and will positively influence trust within communication. Their absence does not have a negative effect on the existent trust, by reason of the missing expectations of the transaction partners. As with the Basics, a non-linear (concave) correlation is assumed here too. The One-dimensionals can have a negative or a positive effect on the communicative trust sustainability in a business relationship. Here, the trust stabilisation and strengthening behaves proportionally to the degree of performance of the factors. The higher the degree is, the higher the trust is, and vice versa. Furthermore, two other factor categories can be formulated: the so-called indifferent and reverse factors. The indifferent factor category has no direct influence. Those factors are mentioned quite often in theory; however, they are not attributed any further relevance by the business partners. The reverse factors, on the other hand, fortify trustful communication when they do not occur, and lead to the prevention of trustful communication when fulfilled.

## Sample

This investigation focuses on dentists in private practice in a chosen region since dentists are both the financially strongest and the most common medical practitioners. Because dental practices normally have a considerably higher monetary investment in medical equipment than other practitioners do, trust in the business partner has to be higher. Furthermore, it is essential for this investigation that the dentists surveyed are able to make their purchase decisions independently. The region chosen for this investigation includes large cities as well as rural areas and is, therefore, representative of the national distribution of dentists. Out of the 612 possible participants, 100 dentists have been chosen randomly for participation. The reduced sample possesses several essential advantages for the Kano-analysis, which is characterised by a high degree of complexity. This method of examination is very time-consuming and cost-intensive. In a first run, the 100 participants were contacted and asked whether they would be willing to participate in the research. These dentists assured us that they would respond to the questionnaire themselves and in terms of their supplier relationship that had existed for several years. Trust is an attribute of long-term relationships; therefore, it is very important to distinguish between those and one-time contacts with suppliers, and also to prevent receptionists answering the questionnaires. All but six participants agreed to this first step. A 15-minute online questionnaire was anonymously with the help of the software Grafstat. The survey period lasted eight weeks. After the link for the questionnaire was sent out a follow-up was carried out after four weeks and a second after six weeks. An identification of 60 useful questionnaires was made, equalling a return rate of 60%. 51.84% participants had been dentists over twenty years, 84.08% were independent and more than 50% had between five and ten employees. Thus, the findings should be valid.

## Measurement model

The factors are classified into the three categories of Basics, One-dimensionals and Attractives using a questionnaire characterised by formulating two questions for each identified factor. There are five possible answers for each question. The first question determines the reaction of the respondent in the case of existence of the factor (functional questioning way); the second question refers to the reaction of the respondent in the case of absence of the same factor (dysfunctional questioning way). The combination of both answers to those factors in an evaluation table enables the classification of the attributes of trustful communication. The final question asks whether the participants are content with the use of the contemplated factors of trustful communication within purchase situations with their long time familiar supplier (five-point scale from 'very content' to 'not content at all') and whether they can imagine another purchase or business deal with this supplier ('probably yes'/'probably not').



Table 2: Categorisation of the different attributes

Examination of frequencies	Basic	One-dimensional	Attractive	Indifferent	Converse	Questionable	Category
Actuality	<b>0.38</b>	0.33	0.15	0.13	0.00	0.00	<i>Basic</i>
Adaptability	0.32	<b>0.45</b>	0.17	0.05	0.02	0.00	<i>One-dim.</i>
Benevolence	0.10	0.37	<b>0.42</b>	0.08	0.02	0.02	<i>Attractive</i>
Competence	<b>0.53</b>	0.17	0.18	0.12	0.00	0.00	<i>Basic</i>
Completeness	<b>0.45</b>	0.30	0.10	0.15	0.00	0.00	<i>Basic</i>
Consistency	0.02	<b>0.47</b>	0.43	0.08	0.00	0.00	<i>One-dim.</i>
Credibility	<b>0.52</b>	0.33	0.08	0.05	0.00	0.02	<i>Basic</i>
Explanatory	<b>0.35</b>	0.22	0.15	0.27	0.00	0.02	<i>Basic</i>
Honesty	<b>0.57</b>	0.38	0.03	0.02	0.00	0.00	<i>Basic</i>
Integrity	<b>0.45</b>	0.23	0.17	0.12	0.03	0.00	<i>Basic</i>
Need-orientation	0.25	<b>0.33</b>	0.32	0.08	0.00	0.02	<i>One-dim.</i>
Openness	<b>0.45</b>	0.33	0.13	0.08	0.00	0.00	<i>Basic</i>
Presentation of alternatives	0.20	0.28	<b>0.37</b>	0.15	0.00	0.00	<i>Attractive</i>
Relevance	<b>0.45</b>	0.33	0.15	0.07	0.00	0.00	<i>Basic</i>
Reliability	<b>0.48</b>	0.47	0.02	0.02	0.00	0.00	<i>Basic</i>
Reputation	0.17	0.25	0.18	<b>0.40</b>	0.00	0.00	<i>Indiff.</i>
Resemblance	0.12	0.12	<b>0.38</b>	0.35	0.02	0.02	<i>Attractive</i>
Sympathy	0.02	0.18	<b>0.57</b>	0.20	0.03	0.00	<i>Attractive</i>
Timeliness	0.33	<b>0.50</b>	0.03	0.13	0.00	0.00	<i>One-dim.</i>
Understandability	0.35	<b>0.42</b>	0.12	0.12	0.00	0.00	<i>One-dim.</i>

### *Empirical results*

Ten Basics, five One-dimensionals and four Attractives were identified. Table 2 illustrates the respondents' views as to which of the six Kano categories each factor of trustful communication should be assigned to, and therefore which category has the absolute assignment frequency.

The Basics include competence, integrity, reliability and credibility. Other essential factors are honesty and openness. Furthermore, the content of the communication should be up to date, complete and relevant. The explanatory character of the content of communication is taken for granted. In contrast, the participants see consistency as a One-dimensional. The factors of timeliness and comprehensibility are also related to this group of factors, and need-orientation and adaptability by the communication partner are also expected in a trustful communication. On the other hand, the aspects of good will, presentation of alternatives (alternative products) as well as resemblance and sympathy of the communication partner are not expected. Moreover, reputation has been evaluated as indifferent. This result seems astonishing at first

Table 3: Directness of the assignment of the particular attributes

Examination of Category strength/ Total strength	Category strength	Total strength
Actuality	<b>0.05</b>	0.86
Adaptability	0.13	
Benevolence	<b>0.05</b>	0.89
Competence	0.35	
Completeness	0.15	
Consistency	<b>0.04</b>	0.92
Credibility	0.19	
Explanatory	0.08	
Honesty	0.19	
Integrity	0.22	
Need-orientation	<b>0.01</b>	0.90
Openness	0.12	
Presentation of alternatives	<b>0.04</b>	0.85
Relevance	0.12	
Reliability	<b>0.01</b>	0.97
Reputation	0.15	
Resemblance	<b>0.03</b>	0.62
Sympathy	0.37	
Timeliness	0.17	
Understandability	0.07	

sight, as a multitude of studies point out the importance of reputation (Huemer, 1998; Mitchell, Reast and Lynch, 1998; Inkpen and Currall, 2004; Smeltzer, 1997; Ganesan, 1994; Anderson and Weitz, 1989; Dasgupta, 1988). The establishment of a good reputation is considered as an essential intangible asset that is put at risk in the case of opportunistic behaviour (Cabral and Hortascu, 2010; Walter and Ritter, 2003; Yoon, Guffrey and Kijewski, 1993; Williamson, 1991; Roberts and Dowling, 2002). It can be assumed, taking into account the high educational standard of dentists, that those participants are used to working together with business partners who have a good reputation. Table 3 demonstrates the directness of the assignment of the individual factors to their categories. This is evaluated using the indices of Category Strength (Cat) and Total Strength (Tot), identified by Lee and Newcomb (1996). The Category Strength is a quantitative analysis of the difference between the most frequently named category and the second most frequently mentioned. Thus, the higher the Category Strength, the more direct is the assignment of the factors to a category.

According to Lee and Newcomb (1996), all factors showing a Category Strength of less than 6% cannot be directly assigned to a category. In this study, this applies to seven factors which belong to the Mixed Category. To further

classify those factors which, according to Category Strength, belong to the Mixed Category, their Total Strength has to be calculated. The Total Strength equals the sum of the parts of Basics, One-dimensionals and Attractives of the factors. The higher the value of the Total Strength, the higher the share of those respondents to whom the factors are of importance, independent from the category. The combination of the Total Strength value and the particular category assignment of the individual factors means that it is possible to determine the order in which the attributes should be observed. The contemplated values of the Total Strength are consistently high, leading to the assumption that all the factors are of importance. Only the value of the resemblance factor is low in comparison to the other factors and, therefore, can be classified as less important. In general, however, the value of 0.62 is still significantly higher than the critical value of importance of 0.5 deduced from the literature. To determine whether a factor can strengthen and stabilise trust or simply prevent the erosion of the existent trust in the business relationship, two coefficients have to be calculated. In order to calculate the coefficient of trust promotion, the share of mentions of One-dimensionals and Attractives

**Table 4: Coefficients of stabilisation/strengthening and weakening of trust**

Factor	Category	Coefficient of trust stabilisation	Coefficient of trust weakening
Actuality	Basic	0.48	-0.72
Adaptability	One-dim.	0.62	-0.77
Benevolence	Attractive	0.81	-0.48
Competence	Basic	0.35	-0.70
Completeness	Basic	0.40	-0.75
Consistency	One-dim.	0.90	-0.49
Credibility	Basic	0.42	-0.87
Explanatory	Basic	0.37	-0.58
Honesty	Basic	0.41	-0.95
Integrity	Basic	0.44	-0.76
Need-orientation	One-dim.	0.66	-0.59
Openness	Basic	0.46	-0.79
Presentation of alternatives	Attractive	0.65	-0.48
Relevance	Basic	0.48	-0.78
Reliability	Basic	0.50	-0.95
Reputation	Indiff.	0.43	-0.42
Resemblance	Attractive	0.52	-0.75
Sympathy	Attractive	0.77	-0.21
Timeliness	One-dim.	0.54	-0.84
Understandability	One-dim.	0.53	-0.76

promoting trust is related to the total of all mentions – less the questionable and opposite factors. A value near zero signifies little contribution by the corresponding attributes to the promotion and stabilisation of trust. In contrast, a value near one reveals a high influence on the stabilisation of trust (Maltzer *et al.*, 1996).

The other coefficient provides information on the reduction of trust in the case of non-fulfilment of the corresponding attributes. Values near zero signify a small contribution to the reduction or loss of trust, whereas values near minus one point to a high influence in the case of non-fulfilment of these attributes and to the loss of trust. The following consequences concerning the implications of the design of trustful communication arise. When a factor scores a value near minus one in a coefficient reducing trust, the respective factor has to be fulfilled by the trust taker or giver at all costs. Otherwise, it has to be anticipated that the client is not going to purchase the particular product due to their reduced level of trust in the supplier. A factor with a high trust stabilising or strengthening value and with a trust reducing coefficient value near zero, leads neither to a significant reduction nor strengthening of the existent trust level. The level of trust is rather stabilised in this case. The fulfilment of those factors, however, enables innovative companies to differentiate themselves from the competition. When both values are near zero, it can be gathered that the particular factors have little influence upon the existent trust level. The supplier is able to save costs by not fulfilling these

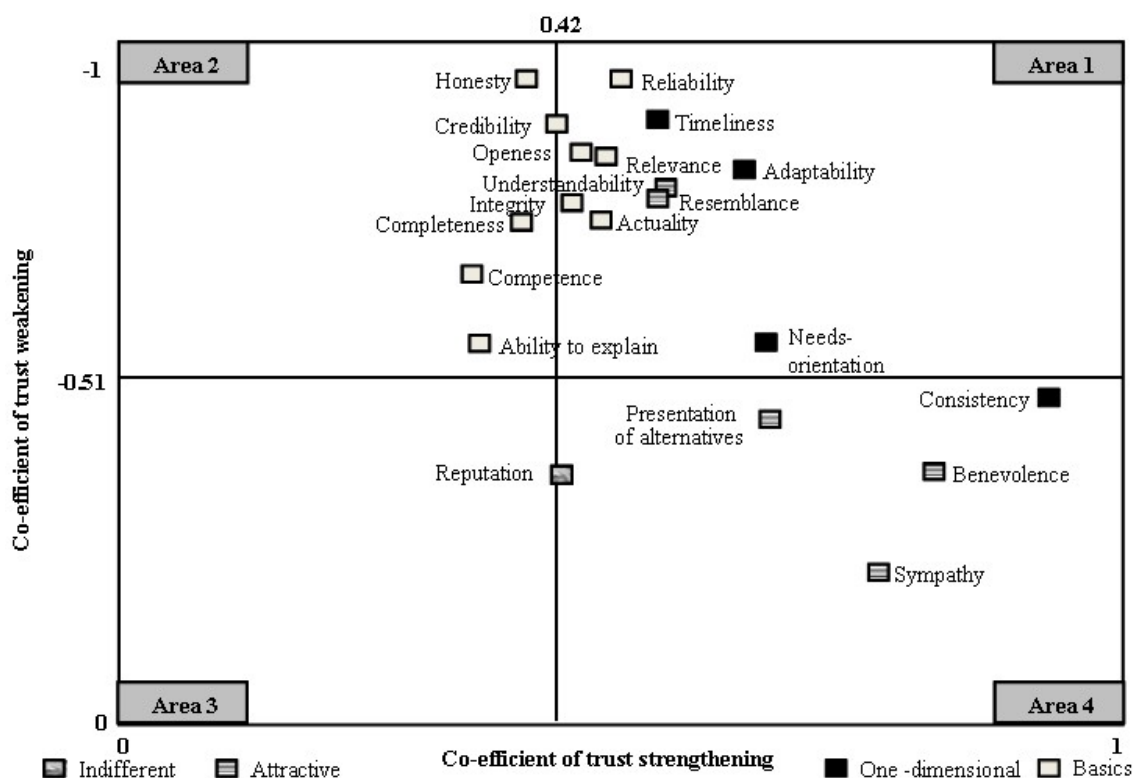


Figure 2: Overview of the potential of all the attributes to strengthen or weaken trust

	Test value = 0					
	T	df	Signific. (2-side.)	Mean difference	95% confidence interval of difference	
					Lower	Upper
Actuality	18.616	59	0.000***	1.833	1.64	2.03
Adaptability	18.854	59	0.000***	1.917	1.71	2.12
Appropriateness	18.387	59	0.000***	1.633	1.46	1.81
Benevolence	17.639	59	0.000***	1.783	1.58	1.99
Competence	20.739	59	0.000***	1.217	1.10	1.33
Completeness	13.814	59	0.000***	1.733	1.48	1.98
Consistency	16.071	59	0.000***	2.783	2.44	3.13
Credibility	14.512	59	0.000***	1.483	1.28	1.69
Explanatory	14.282	59	0.000***	1.833	1.58	2.09
Honesty	15.470	59	0.000***	1.267	1.10	1.43
Integrity	20.698	59	0.000***	1.417	1.28	1.55
Need-orientation	18.134	59	0.000***	1.883	1.68	2.09
Openness	16.212	59	0.000***	1.517	1.33	1.70
Presenting alternatives	17.160	59	0.000***	1.900	1.68	2.12
Relevance	20.707	59	0.000***	1.967	1.78	2.16
Reliability	20.238	59	0.000***	1.317	1.19	1.45
Reputation	17.009	59	0.000***	3.250	2.87	3.63
Sympathy	20.852	59	0.000***	2.950	2.67	3.23
Timeliness	17.677	59	0.000***	1.883	1.67	2.10
Understandability	19.166	59	0.000***	1.883	1.69	2.08

Figure 3: Significance of the Kano-examination

factors or by reducing the proficiency level of those factors, all without compromising the mutual trust between himself and the customer. Table 4 gives an overview of the coefficients of the individual factors of trustful communication.

The factors of openness, honesty, credibility and reliability have a value near minus one in regard to the coefficient reducing trust. This implies that those attributes have to be fulfilled by the trust taker at any cost otherwise there is a danger of weakening the existent mutual trust of the client. In this context, the attributes of honesty and reliability embody essential Basics, as their corresponding coefficient has a value of 0.95, being the closest value to one that is possible. The coefficients of stabilisation and promotion of trust are quite average, at 0.5 and 0.41 respectively. Therefore, the fulfilment of those factors hardly contributes to the promotion of the level of trust at all, whereas their non-fulfilment leads to a huge reduction in the existent trust of the customer. It is rather remarkable that the factor of reputation, which is seen to be regarded indifferently by the clients, has a medium value for both coefficients.

This result supports the initial assumption of the particular factor being a factor of very low importance to the participant due to the sample speciality. The high 0.9 value of the factor of consistency proves the comparatively high potential of stabilisation and strengthening of trust. Figure 3 gives an overview of the potential of all factors of trustful communication, showing them in the two-dimensional space results from the corresponding coefficient of trust strengthening (x-axis) and the coefficient of trust reduction (y-axis). The dividing lines represent the mean value of all values of one coefficient, leading to four different areas in the graph. Each area provides different starting points concerning the level of trust between interaction partners.

The higher a factor lies above the horizontal line (area 1 and area 2), the higher its contribution to strengthening trust. Therefore, the honesty of the communication content as well as the reliability of communication are essential Basics for trustful communication of an interaction partner: they have to be fulfilled at any cost. Here, reliability (area 1) has a comparatively higher impact on the strengthening of trust than honesty (area 2). In area 4 are the factors with an above average potential to strengthen trust. Consistency is the only One-dimensional stabilising and promoting the level of trust. Sympathy, courtesy and presentation of alternatives create enthusiasm in the customer, leading to a significant strengthening of the existent mutual trust between the communication partners. Those factors contribute to differentiation from the competition. When there is additional sympathy between the individual persons, this can be seen as an essential factor of the strengthening of trust between the interaction partners. In area 3 are those factors contributing to below average strengthening or weakening of trust from the viewpoint of the customers. Those factors can be neglected in the communication and where necessary, costs can be saved. Apparently, the factor of an exact explanation of a new product is not of much importance to the customers (explanatory is located close to area 3). It is rather important to the clients that they can depend on the communication content of the supplier. From this standpoint, things like brochures, with detailed explanations of new products may become less important in the future, due to an increased use of the factors. Furthermore, a lot of time could be saved regarding fieldwork when the field staff know that they do not have to explain the products in detail. Here, the special meaning of reputation in this study can be supported, as reputation is also located in area 3.

## Discussion

In the following, the results of the Kano-survey are interpreted leading to primary recommendations for courses of action concerning the design of the factors of trustful communication. In the literature, various approaches to testing the statistical significance can be found. The t-test is considered to provide first insights presented in Figure 4 (Löfgren and Witell, 2005).

In order to deduce reliable statements and implications from the data of the Kano-analysis, a certain level of data quality has to be guaranteed (Lehmann, Gupta and Steckel, 1997). Objectivity is attested by means of three aspects. The online survey guarantees a high degree of anonymity for the participants and

Re-purchase * sympathy cross-tabulation					
		Sympathy			
		Attractive	One-dimensional	Basic	Total
<b>Re-purchase</b>	Number	11	8	5	24
	% of sympathy	52.38%	30.77%	38.46%	40.00%
<b>Change of supplier</b>	Number	10	18	8	36
	% of sympathy	47.62%	69.23%	61.54%	60.00%
<b>Total</b>	Number	21	26	13	60
	% of sympathy	100%	100%	100%	100%

Figure 4: Cross-tabulation of the factor of sympathy

therefore, contributes to performance quality. Due to the inflexible guidelines for the design of the questionnaire and the binding rules for evaluation during the data analysis, the degrees of freedom are very low in the Kano-analysis. This supports and strengthens the evaluation objectivity as well as the performance objectivity. High interpretation objectivity is attested as a result of the given definitions for the various categories and their effects on trustful communication according to the Kano-model. The reliability coefficient of both halves of the test is estimated using the Spearman-Brown formula, enabling a correct determination of the reliability of the entire Kano-examination (Rosander, 1936). The values of the Spearman-Brown coefficient for the identical and not identical length amount to 0.627 and the Split-Half reliability according to Guttman has a value of 0.625. Thus, both values are located between 0.5 and 0.7 and can, therefore, be seen as quite viable. The Cronbach's  $\alpha$  of 0.394, however, has to be seen as rather weak. Therefore, the reliability of the Kano-method doubtlessly needs improvement if the norms of the classical test theory apply. However, it has to be stated that the high values of reliability of the social research are achieved using scales that do not use combinations of functional and dysfunctional questions.

There also are different kinds of quality criteria for validity. In general, a plausible theoretical framework is required for validity. In this examination, the validity of the content is guaranteed by the documentary analysis and the accompanying observation. The structured procedure of the identification of relevant items of the Kano-examination ensures a representative choice of possible items. The prognosis validity is tested by asking about the participants' intentions regarding purchasing of a product innovation from the same supplier. Twenty-four out of the 60 participants showed themselves to be content with the application of the given factors and could imagine purchasing another product innovation. This number is related to the particular Kano-criteria of trustful communication (Wilkinson *et al.*, 1992). According to the assumptions, the participants who have bought a product and who would buy again would have to have a higher relative share of Attractives compared to Basics and One-dimensionals. Fifty-two per cent of the participants stating sympathy as an Attractive would buy another innovation,

whereas only 38.46% of the participants seeing sympathy as a Basic would buy another innovation. A similar situation can be observed regarding the presentation of alternatives. Therefore, prognosis validity can be stated. Figure 4 illustrates a tabulation of the Attractive factor of sympathy.

## Limitations

The empirical examination for establishing the factors of trustful communication showed that a sustainable categorisation is possible using the Kano-model. The identified relevant Basics, One-dimensionals and Attractives as well as the coefficients of trust strengthening and weakening offer high information content. The simultaneous observation of both coefficients in a two-dimensional illustration provides valuable data for the design of trustful communication. However, some weaknesses were seen in the Kano-model. Firstly, the double sided question lead to problems; the participants were exhausted very quickly, expressed a lack of understanding of the procedure or did not quite understand the questions asked (Maltzer and Hinterhuber, 1998; Yang, 2005). The questions were able to be reduced by reason of the previous test, using observation and documentary analysis, identified essential factors. Also, in the evaluation, the assignment of a factor to one of the six Kano-categories exclusively by using the relative and absolute frequencies was problematic in the case of very heterogeneous answers. This problem was especially seen in regard to the factors of reliability. Forty-eight per cent of the participants classified reliability as Basic, while 47% believed that reliability was a One-dimensional. In the literature, in this situation of an unclear classification, the application of evaluation rules is recommended in order to achieve better results. Exemplarily, the rules of  $M > O > A$  (Basic > One-dimensional > Attractive; Löfgren and Witell, 2005) and  $(O + A + M) > (I + R + Q)$  ((Share of One-dimensionals + Attractives + Basics) > (indifferent + reverse + questionable shares) Berger *et al.*, 1993) are proposed. Following those rules, reliability would be ranked as a Basic, therefore, those two rules should be enough as a demonstration. Lastly, due to the given method pattern of the Kano-analysis, the classical test procedures could only be partially applied. Thus, altogether, rather weak values could be calculated like that of the Cronbach's  $\alpha$ . Those weaknesses have to be accepted as there are not yet specific quality criteria for Kano-analyses. Altogether, the Kano-analysis provided essential insights concerning the relevant factors of trustful communication and offers a first approach concerning its design (De Ridder, 2004).

## Future research

The above analysis shows that further research is necessary into the multi-faceted factors of a trustful communication. To date, trust research has focused on trust in individuals and less on trust in organisations, like retailers (Searle, Weibel and Den Hartog, 2011). More work in that area is needed to clarify whether the same factors are important to individuals as well as organisations. Perhaps different categories of the factors can be identified, too. More attention has to be paid to dyads, especially the impact of



asymmetries between parties (De Jong and Dirks, 2010). Furthermore, it has to be clarified as to how the reactions of others impact the relevance of the identified factors in the different categories. There are several other areas of trust which are worthy of further research.

## **Implications for management**

### *General implications*

#### *The non-fulfilment of a Basic destroys a business relationship*

Basics are claimed by the participants to be basic factors in trustful communication between business partners. Any non-observance on the part of the producing company leads to huge losses of trust and, in the worst case, prevents further co-operation with the particular partner. Ten attributes could be identified as Basics: competency, integrity, reliability, credibility, honesty, openness, actuality, completeness, relevance and explanation. That means a sales person in a media/engineering company should be qualified. His communication style must be open and honest. If there are any inconsistencies or false interpretations customers will end the relationship. Thus, implicit companies should never forget these attributes unless they give their business partners a reason to break up the relationship.

#### *One-dimensionals can promote as well as destroy trust*

One-dimensionals are characterised as leading to a weakening of the existent trust level between business partners in the event of non-fulfilment. When fulfilled, however, they stabilise and strengthen the existent trust level. Five factors could be identified: timeliness, understandability, need-orientation, adaptability and consistency. Understandable communication is more important for trustful communication to customers than complete and oftentimes complex information. Customers do not want to get all the positive information – they want to understand what their business partner wants to sell. Furthermore, the business partner should be need-oriented; otherwise they do not need such a partner. Companies should pay attention to understandable and relevant communication and should stay in regular contact. Getting in contact only when selling a new product does not work.

#### *Attractives enable advantages in competition*

Attractives are primarily characterised by stabilising and strengthening of the level of trust in the case of fulfilment. Companies are able to generate competitive advantages by fulfilling those factors. In the framework of this examination, four essential Attractives could be identified: courtesy, presentation of alternatives, resemblance and sympathy. Sympathy between the sales person as the representative of the company and his business partner strongly strengthens trust, similarly in the case of reassembling. There are some Attractive aspects which a company can influence and others which happen by coincidence. For companies, especially important are those aspects that can be easily influenced, for example, the presentation of different alternatives when selling a product. This presentation of alternatives is a great idea for

companies, because if the sales person pays attention to this aspect, it is easy to strengthen the relationship with the business partner.

### ***Specific implications***

#### *Open and honest communication is not expected but required*

Honesty and Openness are seen to be self-evident for trustful communication between business partners by a multitude of participants. In the case of any neglect of those attributes by the producing company, a breach of trust can be expected. Such a weakening of trust can be compensated for by a lot of commitment and time. Since breaches of trust often lead to a complete annulment of an existent business relationship, companies should be very honest with everything they say in the business relationship. It is better to admit mistakes and the possible problems and risks of a new product than to hide information.

#### *Consistent and continuous communication strengthens a business relationship*

Consistency is the factor that most strongly contributes to the stabilisation of trust between the company and the customer (0.9). Therefore, companies should make consistency a major focus. In addition, since customers are sceptical concerning changes in the communication with the business partner, the producing company should contact the client as regularly as possible and should ensure that communication happens continuously and consistently. Therefore, it can be really important for companies not to send only one salesperson to a customer as when that single employee is on holiday, or worse, leaves the company, the business relationship can be destroyed. It is important to build trust towards the company itself and not just towards the salesperson.

#### *Sympathetic appearance and the presentation of alternatives enthuses the customer*

Sympathy and the presentation of alternatives are factors leading to a clear strengthening of the existent mutual trust between the communication partners. Both factors contribute mainly to the differentiation from the competition. Sympathy has to be emphasised though, as great importance was attached to this factor during the direct questioning of the participants. When the business partner perceives the company as sympathetic, this can create a considerable competitive advantage.

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