

Customer-Centric Digital Business Training: Evaluation of Entrepreneurs' Skills and Training Content

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Abstract: In an increasingly digitalised business environment, customer-centricity has become a key factor in ensuring long-term success and competitiveness for micro-enterprises. Understanding the needs of the customer is essential for developing sustainable and valuable digital services, as it enables micro-enterprises to target products and services efficiently. As customer needs and digital services are changing and evolving, the digital skills and competences of micro-enterprises often need to be developed or regularly refreshed." To understand how digital business training can foster a customer-centric approach in entrepreneurs, this paper examines the outcomes of a project providing digital skills training for micro-enterprises in the South Savo region, Finland. This two-year case study evaluates the effectiveness of the digital business training in developing customer understanding. The research questions are: 1) How do micro-entrepreneurs assess their level of customer understanding before and after attending the project's training sessions? 2) How successful has the project been in fostering and supporting customer-centricity and understanding through its training programs? Following a customer-centric approach grounded in the theoretical literature, we surveyed 129 entrepreneurs using a questionnaire on digital business competences. Using metrics, we assessed the entrepreneur's level of customer understanding and the supporting business practices. Further, we analysed the content of 29 different digital business training courses to evaluate how they support, or not, entrepreneurs in improving their focus on the customer and the types of customer-oriented actions in their business operations. The results reveal that project contributed to a visible improvement in entrepreneurs' customer-related competencies. Digital business training courses supported this by using customer-oriented methods and training sessions themselves being described in customer-centric way. More research would be needed on assessing the long-term impact of customer-centric digital business training on micro-enterprises' operational practices, customer engagement, and sustained business growth, particularly in how newly acquired competencies are maintained, adapted to evolving digital environments, and translated into measurable business outcomes over time.

Keywords: Customer-Centric, Customer Understanding, Digital Business Training, Micro-Enterprises, Finland

1. Introduction

In Finnish business culture, a production-oriented mindset still dominates, with services often developed from the organisation's perspective rather than customer needs. Although some companies have successfully adopted customer-oriented approaches, there is a growing need for tools and metrics to support this shift (Saarijärvi et al. 2020). According to the Finnish Government (2022), barriers to digital development in SMEs include a lack of growth ambition, limited vision, insufficient financial resources, and a lack of expertise. Understanding the opportunities enabled by digitalisation that can drive business forward is essential.

Even when solo entrepreneurs are motivated, the development of digital skills, or the adoption of new tools is often limited by a lack of time. In many cases, external encouragement and support are necessary to initiate change. The effectiveness of digital training depends on recognising the diverse users and their varied needs, and on targeting support to these needs, which requires understanding of the users and their operational context. (Digital and Population Data Services Agency, 2021).

Small and medium-sized enterprises in the region mainly operate within traditional industries, with the service sector being the largest employer. The number of growth-oriented companies in the area remains limited (The Regional Council of South Savo, 2022). Due to the region's business profile, this paper focuses on developing customer-centric business operations in small enterprises, and solo entrepreneurs.

The *digital steps - towards customer-oriented digital business* project (2023–2025) aimed to improve small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) digital skills and customer-centric thinking in the South Savo Region, Finland. Training sessions, coaching, and focused development programmes helped participating SMEs achieve business growth. The project has reached 180 SMEs, mostly micro-companies, in the region. During the past 18 months, the project has provided 96 digital skills training sessions at both basic and advanced levels. 134 SMEs have participated in the training sessions, coaching and focused development programs built around the needs of SMEs.

The paper presents a case study on how entrepreneurs evaluate their development of customer understanding as a result of the digital business training. Our research questions are: how do micro-entrepreneurs assess their level of customer understanding before and after attending training sessions? And how successful has the project been in fostering and supporting customer-centricity and understanding through its training programs?

The paper proceeds as follows: first, we review previous literature on customer-centric thinking, its benefits for businesses and their customers, and practical methods for implementing this approach. After that, we outline the results of the entrepreneur's level of customer understanding before and after participating in training sessions, coaching and development programmes. Next, we examine the training descriptions conducted by the project and analyse how customer-centricity appears in the training content. We conclude by discussing how the results reveal the digital competence of SMEs from the perspective of customer-centricity and how training programs can better support customer-oriented digital business.

1. Customer-centricity as a Competitive Advantage

Global markets and the technological capability to purchase anything from anywhere have given customers a level of power they did not previously possess (Fader 2020). Customers are no longer limited to products and services offered by local businesses; instead, they can easily acquire what they want, when they want. Small businesses are now expected to deliver customer experiences as seamless as those of large corporations, and customers are quick to switch providers if they perceive the service as too slow or complicated (Hänti, 2021). This shift requires companies to change their perspective and adopt a customer-centric approach. As Giménez (2018) argues, maintaining an ongoing and meaningful relationship with customers is the only way to survive in the competitive market. Furthermore, Adlar et al. (2020) emphasise that every company has its own set of activities that drive customer-led growth, though such change does not happen overnight.

By adopting a customer-centric approach, businesses can build a more sustainable model by focusing on the acquisition and retention of committed customers, nurturing long-term relationships, and increasing purchase frequency or transaction values. This requires shifting the company's focus towards what it knows its customers want (Fader 2020). Such an approach enhances the company's ability to adapt to changing markets, cope with intensified competition, and ultimately achieve higher profitability. Successful companies consistently develop a strong understanding of their customers and establish practices for utilising the customer's point of view. This is based on customer surveys conducted regularly by the company in an effort to avoid unnecessary costs and failures (Vuorela 2024).

Collecting and maintaining essential customer data is an important part of building a deeper understanding of a company's customers. Ahvenainen et al. (2017) state that many companies have access to large amounts of customer data they do not use. This may be due to a lack of knowledge on how to utilise the data, or because existing systems do not offer relevant information. Implementing a Customer Relationship Management (CRM) system is a key step in addressing this; with CRM, businesses can identify their most valuable customers, estimate customer lifetime value (CLV), and create meaningful customer segments. Leveraging this data enables entrepreneurs to personalise their marketing efforts, target the right audience more effectively, and provide superior customer service (Fader 2020). For SMEs, this might be a very straightforward system of keeping records of customers and their purchases, though EU data protection laws, such as GDPR, must be taken into account.

Technologies and data analytics tools also allow companies to understand and anticipate the types of products, prices and channels their customers prefer. Moreover, nurturing customers after the purchase is vital to building customer loyalty (Giménez 2018) and measuring customer satisfaction provides insights into what a company does well and where improvements are needed. Nurturing customers throughout the customer journey requires continuous interaction between companies and their customers, which is why focusing on the design of customer-oriented texts is a concrete way to be customer-centric by improving the experience. Texts that are difficult to understand or are too official or formal can lead to a negative customer experience and may cause the customer to choose a competitor next time (Öörni, 2024).

According to Makkonen & Gracia (2018), you need to choose the right words to communicate your value proposition to your users: What problem are you solving, or what is the main value proposition? Different audiences need different messages and different design styles, underscoring the need for tailored customer communications.

2. Entrepreneurs' Level of Customer Understanding

In order to understand the level of digital skills, we conducted a competence mapping survey at the beginning of the project. The survey included six themes and 18 competence areas. This data was enriched in meetings with a business advisor. The entrepreneur or staff members participated in the training sessions, coaching or eCommerce development program. Some SMEs compiled training and coaching which supported learning and adopting new skills more efficiently. The training approach focused on practical support, emphasising real-world skills and peer-to-peer learning. Participants also had access to online materials like blogs, articles, and guides to help them adopt and apply new tools and knowledge. In addition, companies received personalised coaching based on their specific needs.

After learning new skills, tools and digital business strategies, the SMEs were asked to repeat the same competence mapping survey. The competence mapping was conducted with the Hyviö tool. Hyviö is created to evaluate the impact of services or projects where service providers and customers would benefit from a simple tool that tracks long-term outcomes, rather than focusing solely on short-term results (Janhunen & Kosonen, 2022). This data is important to verify the impact and outcomes of the project as it enables the identification of the desired change within the target group of the activity (Häyrinen & Saali, 2021).

During the period 2023-2025, 180 SMEs participated in the project and met with a business advisor. For over 50% of the companies, this was their first time engaging with the Digital Steps project's training offering or related actions. Altogether 129 companies conducted the digital skills assessment in Hyviö. In this survey, the largest group was the service industry, comprising 26 companies. The second largest sector groups were accommodation and food services (19), and third largest wholesale and retail trade (17). Most respondents were small businesses: solo entrepreneurs and micro-enterprises (1-9 employees) accounted for 117 companies, representing nearly 91% of all respondents. Only seven (7) companies were small enterprises (10–49 employees), and just two were medium-sized enterprises (50–249 employees). Women represented the larger share of respondents (93), while 33 were men. The average age of the respondents was 47 years.

In the Hyviö tool, the level of digital business development can be monitored by retaking the survey. The survey was sent to those entrepreneurs who had participated in the project activities after the initial assessment. Entrepreneurs joined the project at different times, and some only joined during the final months. Therefore, the follow-up survey request was not sent to all companies. It was defined that there must be a 10-month gap between the initial and follow-up surveys. Therefore, the survey was sent to companies that had completed the initial assessment by the end of September 2024 and had participated in project activities thereafter. The follow-up survey was sent on 7 March 2025 to 76 companies. By 14 April, 14 companies had responded to the follow-up survey.

Table 1 presents all the competence areas covered in the digital skills mapping. This article focuses on two key areas: competence and resources, and metrics that support customer understanding and the values are only shown in these areas. The first column contains the value from the initial survey, the next column contains the value from the follow-up survey, and the last column contains the absolute change between the initial and follow-up measurements. In the self-assessment of digital competence mapping conducted in Hyviö, respondents rated the level of their digital business on a scale from 1 to 7. Below 3.0 points: the company still needs support in developing its digital business. 3.1–5.0 points: the company is making good progress in digital business development. Above 5.0 points: the company is already quite advanced in its development.

Table 1: Competence mapping survey. Competence areas and statements.

Multiple Choice Questions Respond to the following statements on a scale of 1 (strongly disagree) to 7 (strongly agree):	Initial survey (avg.)	Follow-up (avg.)	Change
A) COMPETENCE AND RESOURCES 1. We update our website/online store regularly. 2. We continuously develop digital products/services. 3. Resources are allocated for the development of our digital services.			
B) METRICS THAT PROMOTE CUSTOMER UNDERSTANDING 4. We regularly collect customer feedback. 5. We improve the customer experience of the website based on user data.		4,1	

Multiple Choice Questions Respond to the following statements on a scale of 1 (strongly disagree) to 7 (strongly agree):	Initial survey (avg.)	Follow-up (avg.)	Change
6. We perform conversion optimisation, meaning our site is designed to maximise contacts, email list sign-ups, or purchases.	2,9 2,8 2,7	4,2 4,2	+1,2 +1,4 +1,7
C) ACTIONS THAT PROMOTE CUSTOMER UNDERSTANDING 7. We regularly produce customer-centric content online. 8. We offer personalised products, services, and recommendations online for different customer profiles. 9. We serve our customers through multiple channels.	3,7 2,7 2,9	4,2 3,8 4,1	+0,5 +1,1 +1,2
D) PROCESSES 10. We regularly monitor analytics, advertising results, and visitor data. 11. Our company has proper data security and privacy measures in place. 12. We effectively utilise artificial intelligence (AI) in content production or other business operations.			
E) TOOLS 13. Our customers can easily find us online even when they do not know or remember our company name. 14. We regularly do paid advertising on social media. 15. We use email marketing software and regularly send information and offers to subscribers.			
F) DIGITAL STRATEGIES 16. We systematically utilize digital solutions and tools that save time and money and improve efficiency. 17. We grow our business with scalable digital products and services. 18. We regularly sell our products and services outside Finland through digital channels			

The scale in the assessment is 1-7; 1 strongly disagree and 7 strongly agree. Based on the initial competence mapping, the entrepreneurs rated their skills level very low. The average scores for the other statements remained between 2.7 and 2.9. Statement number 7, “We regularly produce customer-centric content online”, reached the highest score of 3.7. According to the follow-up survey, the average score for all competencies had increased by +1.1 to +1.7. The smallest increase was in statement number seven (7); however, it initially had the highest initial score of all statements.

When examining the data more closely, it becomes evident that the companies’ responses are distributed across both ends of the scale. For all questions, responses ranged from 1 to 7. Among the indicators measuring customer-centricity, 64 companies (51%) rated their competence below 3.0, indicating a need for support in developing customer-oriented digital business actions. A total of 46 respondents (37%) fell within the mid-range of 3.1–5.0. Notably, 15 respondents (12%) rated their customer-centric digital business competence above 5, suggesting that these companies are already quite advanced in this area.

Based on the low number of respondents, the overall results of the follow-up survey cannot be generalised: only 14 out of 76 entrepreneurs responded. However, some conclusions can still be drawn. Overall, the responses suggest that participation in the project’s activities has improved the entrepreneurs’ customer understanding, and many have taken actions that promote deeper customer insight. The greatest change was seen in statement number six (6), where the respondents evaluated conversion optimisation – in other words, how well the company’s website is designed to generate as many contact requests, newsletter sign-ups, or purchases as possible. In addition, statement five (5) “we improve the customer experience of the website based on user data” had increased by 1.4.

3. Analysis of Digital Business Training

This chapter analyses how the digital business training provided within the project supports customer-centricity and customer understanding. It analyses this from two different perspectives: first, how these principles are reflected in the training descriptions, and second, what kind of customer-oriented business practices the trainings aim to promote according to the training descriptions.

1.1 Customer-centricity and Understanding in Training Programs

Based on the selected topics that arose from the survey and competence mapping, suitable professionals are tendered out specifically for these trainings. The tendering process emphasises customer-centricity and practical relevance to ensure entrepreneurs receive as much concrete support as possible for their digital challenges (Rajahonka et al., 2023). Training coordinators create the course descriptions based on the syllabus provided by the selected trainer. Each description is then reviewed and approved by the trainer before being published in the project's training calendar. Once approved, the description forms the basis for communication materials used to promote the training via newsletters and social media channels.

To conduct the analysis, we defined specific criteria for evaluating the customer-centricity of the training descriptions. The selection was guided by core principles of customer-centricity and communication. Piskonen and Syrman (2024) state that customer-centric communication helps customers make informed decisions, provides all the necessary information for decision-making and leaves them with a positive impression of the organisation. The six criteria were (1) target customer, (2) clarity and structure, (3) benefits to the target customer, (4) language and tone, (5) call to action (*CAT), and (6) personal support.

The target customer needs to be clearly defined by the writer and easily identifiable in the text (Piskonen, Syrman, 2024). Aiming for clarity and an easy-to-read structure makes the text more approachable and accessible to readers. Reader-oriented text aims to ensure that essential information is easy to locate and understand in written documents (Öörni 2024). Communicating benefits to the target customer requires knowledge of their needs and understanding how the training can help address them. Clearly stated benefits in the course description support decision-making by helping the customer assess whether the training is relevant and valuable to them.

Language and tone used in the text will convey the writer's attitude towards the reader (Öörni 2024). Functional writing uses familiar words and terminology to the target customer. Overly complex vocabulary and a formal tone may cause the writer to appear distant or even arrogant. The call to action should provide explicit information about what the customer should do next if they are interested, along with relevant deadlines and contact details for further questions. Finally, the descriptions were assessed to determine whether they mention opportunities for individual support during the training.

The training offerings were evaluated using a numerical rating scale, where 1 indicated a poor performance with significant room for improvement; 2 indicated a fair level with several deficiencies; 3 indicated a decent standard; 4 indicated a good level requiring only minor refinements; and 5 indicated an excellent performance with no deficiencies.

Table 2: Digital training descriptions' evaluation

Trainings	Target	Clarity	Ben efits	Tone	CAT *	Sup port
Introduction to Facebook and Instagram advertising	4	4	5	4	5	5
Advanced Facebook and Instagram advertising	5	5	5	3	5	4
Create persuasive social media advertising – Advanced training	4	4	5	5	5	4
A/B Testing – Create winning ads on Meta	5	5	5	5	5	4
Customer acquisition on Instagram – Reach, engage & sell effectively on social media	5	5	5	5	5	4

Trainings	Target	Clarity	Benefits	Tone	CAT *	Support
Turn Reels into revenue – How to create video content that boosts visibility and grows your business on Instagram	5	5	5	5	5	2
Canva clinic – City 1	5	4	5	4	5	5
Canva clinic – City 2	5	5	5	4	5	5
Introduction to Analytics for entrepreneurs – Achieving results through data	4	5	5	5	5	1
Customer insight as the engine of sales	5	3	3	3	5	5
First steps in search engine advertising and Google Ads	5	3	4	4	5	3
Achieving results with Google Ads – Advanced level training	5	4	4	4	5	3
Get Things Done workshop (N.N. 1)	3	4	5	3	5	5
Get Things Done workshop (N.N. 2)	3	5	5	4	5	5
Basics of search engine optimisation	5	5	5	4	5	4
Advanced search engine optimisation training	5	4	5	4	5	5
Get found in search results – Google Business profile workshop	4	5	5	4	5	5
Mobile video shooting and editing – Basic training	4	4	3	4	5	5
Mobile photography –Workshop	5	5	5	4	5	5
Writing for the web – Crafting persuasive messages for online and social media	5	4	5	5	5	5
Accommodation entrepreneurs: Take control of Booking – Workshop	4	5	3	4	5	3
WordPress Roast – Optimize your website	3	4	4	5	5	5
Using ChatGPT in everyday tasks	3	4	4	5	5	2
Leveraging AI in content creation	2	5	4	4	5	2
Turn your expertise into an online course	3	5	5	4	5	1
TikTok for business – Basic level	4	4	5	3	4	1
TikTok for business – Advanced level	5	4	5	4	4	5
Opportunities of social media for businesses	4	4	4	4	5	5
Digital clinic: Optimise your Meta pixel and audiences	3	4	5	5	5	5
Average	4,20	4,34	4,58	4,17	4,93	3,89

The most consistent element across the course descriptions was the call to action. The training coordinators followed a clear and structured pattern for this section, providing clear instructions on what is required to participate, including deadlines and links to register. The benefits of the training were generally well presented. Using bullet points to outline these benefits improved readability and made the descriptions easier to skim. The target group was typically mentioned, although it appeared quite far into the description in some cases, which may have reduced the clarity.

The geographical restriction, that the program is intended only for companies based in the South Savo Region, was not mentioned in any of the descriptions. The titles also showed room for improvement. Most simply stated, what the training was about and whether it was at a basic or advanced level. They lacked compelling details such as benefits for the customer or reasons to participate, which could help capture attention. Many of the descriptions would benefit from simplified language. While most of the descriptions spoke directly to

the reader and employed a friendly tone, there were some inconsistencies.

The most unevenly represented criterion across the descriptions was personalised support. In some cases, personal guidance and tailoring were central features of the training. This was reflected in references to the small group sizes, pre-training questionnaires, and personalised feedback provided during the sessions. However, in other descriptions, such elements were not mentioned at all. The project shows a strong commitment to fostering customer-centricity through the different training provisions, although there remains room for improvement in ensuring consistency.

1.2 Customer-oriented Actions Trainings Promote in Business Operations

Due to the study's scope, the analysis focuses on training descriptions rather than the full content of the training sessions. While training descriptions do not provide a complete picture of the training content or its implementation, they serve as a key communication tool between the project and potential participants. Nevertheless, they offer valuable insight into how customer-oriented actions are promoted in training.

Customer-oriented actions examined in the analysis were (1) customer segmentation, (2) use of customer data, and (3) customer-oriented communication. These criteria were used to assess whether the trainings help entrepreneurs target specific customer groups, understand how to collect, analyse and apply customer data, and communicate clearly, relevantly and engagingly to their customers. Training descriptions were evaluated using a three-level scale: mentioned, partly mentioned and not mentioned.

Table 3: Customer-oriented actions in training descriptions

	Mentioned	Partly Mentioned	Not Mentioned
Customer segmentation	11/29	5/29	13/29
Use of customer data	10/29	1/29	18/29
Customer-oriented communication	17/29	4/29	8/29

The analysis of 29 training descriptions revealed variation in how customer-oriented business practices were represented. Customer segmentation was explicitly mentioned in 11 cases and partly in 5. Customer data was used in 10 descriptions, though it was largely absent in the majority. This raises the question of whether customer data should play a more prominent role in training or even be the focus of dedicated training. Customer-oriented communication was the most consistently addressed theme, clearly mentioned in 17 descriptions and partly in 4. This emphasis reflects the fact that most of the training covers marketing-related subjects, such as paid advertising on Facebook and Instagram, organic growth on Instagram, and search engine visibility.

Some training formats, such as practical clinics, did not reference any of the customer-oriented elements. This is because their purpose is to offer hands-on guidance on narrowly defined tools or skills. Only a few descriptions covered all three criteria.

Helping entrepreneurs take customer-oriented actions in their business operations is essential for enabling growth. However, including all three elements in every training might not be practical. The analysis suggests that in some cases, it could be more effective to provide dedicated training focused specifically on customer segmentation or the use of customer data. This would ensure deeper coverage of each topic. Customer-oriented communication is so closely intertwined with digital marketing that it should be incorporated into almost every training. Deeper customer understanding should be addressed in future projects through different kinds of training, such as online courses or workshops.

4. Conclusions

The follow-up survey results indicate a clear improvement in entrepreneurs' customer-related competencies, particularly in areas related to digital engagement and website optimisation. The results imply that the project has supported entrepreneurs in enhancing their customer understanding and taking concrete steps toward more customer-centric practices. In the competence mapping, 51% of the companies assessed their competence levels as low. This is partly understandable, as the participating companies represent various industries and are experts in their specific fields. However, digital business and customer-centric thinking fall outside their core expertise, making these topics challenging.

Customer-centric communication emerged as a key success factor in training content and how the training sessions were described. Clear, engaging communication supports the entrepreneur's ability to understand the value of the training and make an informed decision to participate. Improving the consistency of training descriptions can enhance inclusivity and accessibility. Furthermore, more informative and benefit-driven headlines, the use of subheadings and a friendly tone help establish trust and increase engagement. While businesses outside the South Savo Region rarely register for these trainings, explicitly mentioning the geographical focus could help manage expectations for new readers.

One area where inconsistencies were noted was in the presence of personalised support. Although some trainings featured individual consultation or feedback, others did not mention personalisation at all. Personalised support and how it is integrated into the training should be considered already at the planning stage. The observed inconsistency in this criterion suggests a need for greater emphasis on how each training responds to the individual needs of participants. One trainer offered participants personal consultation after the training as an additional service, which could be considered for future training sessions as well. Naturally, this would increase the trainer's requested fee.

While analysing the competence mapping data, we observed that certain topics had received relatively little attention. At the beginning of the project, we offered a three-part in-person training programme focused on customer-oriented digital business and customer-centricity. Although the training programme was only delivered once due to cost and limited demand, the themes of identifying needs, creating content accordingly, and utilising customer data, remain highly relevant. These should be broken down into smaller workshops or as an online course that each client participating in the project could complete at their own pace. Future training sessions could address for example the following customer-centric themes: 1) defining the company's target groups, 2) utilizing existing customer data, 3) A/B testing the effectiveness of different messages for the same target group, 4) learning how to engage customers on social media, and 5) increasing user-generated content (UGC) on websites or online stores.

These findings not only confirm the positive impact of the training on entrepreneurs' customer-related competencies but also highlight the need for targeted and workshop formats to address specific themes such as data use and customer feedback. The analysis also suggests that training content and its communication should not only reflect customer-centricity but also actively model it throughout the training experience.

Ethics Declaration

Ethical clearance was not required for the research.

AI Declaration

Artificial intelligence (ChatGPT) was used to support the writing and editing of this article. The tool was used to refine language, assist with translation, and enhance overall readability. All content was critically reviewed and approved by the authors.

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