Digital Personal Selling: How Adding Personal Details about the Seller Drives Supplier Preference in Automated B2B Communication

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ABSTRACT

As digital interactions increasingly replace face-to-face transactions, the lack of personal connection between suppliers and buyers has emerged as a concern for B2B companies. Using a scenario-based experiment, this study explores how including personal information such as name or hobbies in B2B offer messages can foster a sense of connectedness between buyer and seller, thus enhancing customers' preference for a supplier. The results demonstrate that personized messages significantly increase supplier preference compared to non-personized messages. This effect is fully mediated by an increased sense of social presence, leading to a stronger feeling of social connectedness. The findings suggest that B2B firms can foster closer customer relationships and increase preference for their offering by incorporating personization into their digital communications, even in highly transactional environments.

Keywords: Personization, Social Connectedness, Supplier Preference, Social Presence, B2B Communication

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1. Introduction

In B2B sales, building a relationship with the customer and creating trust is an important success factor. This usually happens on a personal, person-to-person level (Mouzas et al., 2007; Kaski et al., 2018). However, as more and more activities are shifting to digital channels and becoming automated (Huttelmaier et al., 2022; Corsaro et al., 2021), this is no longer possible as it used to be. In addition, despite the many positive effects, this also leads to an estrangement of customers and suppliers, which has negative consequences: Anonymity encourages rational, ruthless economic relationships that focus on the exchange of products without empathy for the other party (Simmel 2023; Fuchs et al., 2022).

Research and practice are aware of this problem. There is a substantial and growing body of literature on the antecedents and effects of anthropomorphism, social presence, and related constructs centered around a “human touch” in digital communication. This literature explores how social presence can be enhanced in digital communication, how non-human systems such as chatbots can be designed to appear more human, and explores the effects of such a "human touch" on cognitive, affective, and behavioral outcomes (e.g., Yanxia et al., 2024; van Pinxteren & Pluymaekers, 2020; Oh et al., 2018; Adam et al., 2022; Kim et al., 2022; Lu et al., 2016). Although interrelated, these streams of research are of limited value when it comes to solving the core problem: How to reduce alienation? However, this is particularly crucial in the B2B sector, where relationships play a key role.

Two recent studies have conceptualized (van Osselaer et al., 2020) and empirically explored (Fuchs et al., 2022) this phenomenon in a retail context. They find that making the person behind a transaction salient (“personization”) can reduce the perceived distance between customers and suppliers and through this create positive impact on, for example, willingness to pay and product preference (van Osselaer et al., 2020; Fuchs et al., 2022).

However, Fuchs et al. (2022) focused solely on interactions in a B2C environment, where it is very common to disclose information about the manufacturer (handmade cookies, hand-knitted hats) and where the effect is hardly surprising, as the value of such products lies precisely in their individuality, which is expressed, among other things, through knowing the person behind the product. They also found that the effect only unfolds when the personized individual was the producer and not another consumer (Fuchs et al., 2022). It is not yet clear whether this effect also unfolds when it is not a person who actually produces the product, but another employee of the company who is in contact with the customer who is personized. There is evidence in the literature that this is the case: Herhausen et al. (2020) found that the digital presence of service employees with whom customers can interact has a positive impact on customer loyalty and financial performance.

We address this gap by exploring the relationship between the provision of personal information about the seller and customer preferences in a B2B environment where it is not the person who makes the product but a salesperson who is in contact with the customer who is personized. Thus, we attempt to replicate the findings of Fuchs et al. (2022) in a different context to demonstrate the robustness of their results while at the same time propose an enhanced model.

2. Conceptual Background and Hypotheses

Many B2B purchases today are increasingly being handled through e-commerce platforms and digital interactions, such as requesting and receiving offers via contact forms or email, without direct interaction with a company representative. This shift towards self-service is

largely driven by buyer preferences for efficiency and the ability to conduct independent research (Gartner, 2023). Therefore, transactions that once involved personal interaction now happen anonymously online. This has distanced customers from suppliers, leading to undesirable consequences: Anonymity promotes impersonal and pragmatic economic relationships, where transactions are centered solely on the economic exchange without consideration for the other party's interests or emotions. It encourages a more critical and detached perspective toward the other party, reducing purchase decisions to facts and figures (Simmel 2023; Fuchs et al., 2022; van Osselaer et al., 2020), and resulting in lower loyalty and higher switching intentions (Kaabachi et al., 2024).

Research shows that self-disclosure by salespeople helps in evolving long-term B2B customer relationships (Koponen & Julkunen, 2022), as it plays an important role in enhancing social bonds between sellers and customers (Geiger and Turley, 2005) and establishing closer relationships. While one might expect that repeated, personal, two-way interactions are necessary for a customer to feel more connected to a supplier in such environments, van Osselaer et al. (2020) suggest that simply "personizing" the seller by making the individual behind the transaction visible can be just as effective. In line with Fuchs et al. (2022) we define personization as “providing non-competence related background information about a person such as their names, hobbies, family or living situations”. This should lead to the customer actually seeing a supplier as an individual person rather than an anonymous entity, and in turn create a sense of connectedness, a relationship (van Osselaer et al., 2020). Fuchs et al. (2022) empirically demonstrate that such one-way communication is sufficient to make customers feel connected to a seller: Providing background information (such as names, hobbies, or family situation) about a person behind the transaction (in their case the person producing the products sold) led to increased preference and willingness-to-pay for the seller’s products through a stronger sense of connectedness.

Thus, following Fuchs et al. (2022) we expect that adding personal information about the seller to a message increases the customers’ preference to purchase from this seller also in B2B transactions. Formally stated:
H1: Personizing messages (vs. non-personized messages) increases the preference for a supplier.

Fuchs et al. (2022) found that this relationship was only explained by social connectedness and not by the related concept of social presence, which is typically defined as the extent to which another person – especially in virtual communication environments – is perceived as present and ‘real’ (Gunawardena, 1995; Short et al., 1976) or “the sense of being together with another” (Biocca et al. 2003). This is remarkable, as various other studies have shown that social presence – through mediators – has a positive effect on purchase intention and related constructs (e.g., Botha & Reyneke, 2016; Li & Hua, 2022; Grefen & Straub, 2004). In line with this, we argue that before people can feel socially connected to someone, they must first perceive that they are engaging with a "real" person. The feeling of social presence is therefore a necessary but not a sufficient condition. Therefore, we expect personization to enhance social presence, which in turn has a positive effect on social connectedness, which ultimately increases supplier preference. However, consistent with Fuchs et al. (2022), we do not expect social presence to have a significant direct effect on supplier preference. Formally stated, we hypothesize the following:
H2: The positive effect of personization on supplier preference is mediated by an increased sense of social presence, which in turn leads to an increased sense of social connectedness.

3. Method

In accordance with prior research (Fuchs et al., 2022), we apply a scenario-based experimental approach (one factor [offer email A personized/offer email B non-personized vs. offer email A non-personized/offer email B personized] between-subjects design) to test our hypothesis (Viglia et al., 2021). After being introduced to the scenario, participants of the experiment were exposed to two offer emails from companies selling full-extension drawer slides (Rolltec GmbH and SchubFix GmbH)[1]. The key question was from which seller the participants would most likely order. The offer emails of the two sellers were presented side-by-side; Rolltec was always presented on the left. We implemented the personizing treatment by varying whether RollTec or SchubFix provided personal information about the seller (Group 1: Rolltec Personized, SchubFix non-personized; Group 2: RollTec non-personized, SchubFix personized). The emails presented were offer emails in response to online inquiries—a common and realistic scenario. The manipulation was carried out using personification stimuli based on the examples of Fuchs et al. (2022). The personized email included details about the seller, such as name, profile picture, personal background, a handwritten signature, and personized contact information (email and phone). In contrast, the non-personized email only mentioned the company name as the sender, with generic contact information (contact@rolltec.de/contact@schubfix.de; +49 9341 789-0). We excluded competence-related details from the emails, so that the personal information per se should not influence the evaluation of the seller's offer. Both emails were based on real emails from a medium-sized company, and their realism was verified by company representatives. Please see Appendix for detailed description of scenario and stimuli.

4. Data Collection and Sample

We recruited participants via email, social media, survey circle (a platform to find survey participants) and on the parking lot of a medium-sized company. Out of the 104 participants in our experiment, 11 did not pass the attention and/or manipulation checks. Of the remaining 93 participants 50 received the “RollTec personized / SchubFix non-personized”- (in the following “personized”) and 43 the “RollTec non-personized / SchubFix personized”-treatment (in the following “non-personized”). The average age of the participants was 33.8 years (SD = 11.5); 33.3% were female, 65.6% were male and 1.1% divers. 40.9% reported to work for a small-medium-sized enterprise (<250 employees), 24.7% for large enterprises (250-2,000 employees), and 25.8% for companies with more than 2,000 employees; 8.6% did not indicate.

Participants were randomly assigned to one of the two experimental conditions: (1) RollTec personized / SchubFix non-personized, and (2) RollTec non-personized / SchubFix personized. They were shown the scenario and the two offer emails, followed by questions regarding the constructs of interest as well as manipulation, realism, and attention checks (Viglia et al., 2021). Demographic information was collected at the beginning of the survey.

5. Measurement

Wherever possible, the multi-item scales were adapted from previous research. All items for our mediators and dependent variable were evaluated on a 7-point semantic differential (1 = RollTec GmbH (email A), 7 = SchubFix GmbH (email B) except for “social presence”, which was measured on a a 7-point Likert-like scale. We assessed “supplier preference” using the

[1] We chose this scenario because we had access to the purchasing and sales managers of a medium-sized company in this industry, as well as real emails from their business transactions, which ensured a high degree of realism. Furthermore, the product is easily understood by a wide audience and familiar to many in their personal lives. It is also a typical commodity with intense competition and high daily volumes.

three items of Lu et al. (2016)'s purchase intention scale as well as two additional items slightly adapted from Fuchs et al. (2022)'s product preference scale. "Social connectedness" was measured with the original three items from Fuchs et al. (2022). "Social presence" was assessed with the original five items from Grefen & Straub (2004) and not with the one-item scale of Fuchs et al. (2022).

To assess the measurement model, we first performed an exploratory factor analysis on each construct to investigate its unidimensionality. We then ran a confirmatory factor analysis to examine item loading, composite reliability, convergent validity, and discriminant validity. All items showed factor loadings > 0.70 so that we did not have to remove items. Results of our confirmatory factor analysis show that the final measurement model fits the data well (RMSEA = .00; CFI = 1.00; TLI = 1.02). All factor loadings (>.70), cronbach's alpha (>.70), the composite reliability (CR; >.70), and the average variance extracted (AVE; >.50) of all constructs are above the recommended thresholds, thereby showing a sufficient internal consistency, reliability, and validity of our measures (Hair et al., 2011; Bagozzi & Yi, 1988; Nunnally & Bernstein, 1994). Furthermore, with all square roots of each construct's AVE being greater than its correlation with the other construct, our constructs exhibit discriminant validity (Fornell & Larcker, 1981). For details see table 1 and table 2.

Construct	No. Items	AVE	CR	1.	2.	3.
1. Supplier Preference	5	.903	.978	(α = .979)		
2. Social Connectedness	3	.876	.953	.709**	(α = .954)	
3. Social Presence	5	.859	.961	.703**	.494**	(α = .967)

** p < .01 (two-tailed) Notes: Cronbach's (1951) internal consistency reliability reported on the diagonal; AVE = Average Variance Extracted; CR = Composite Reliability

Table 1: Factor Correlation Matrix and Measurement Information

Construct	Items	Factor Loadings	Std. Factor Loadings	Source
Supplier Preference	I would accept the offer from RollTec GmbH / SchubFix GmbH	1.949	.971	Lu et al. (2016);
	I would choose RollTec GmbH / SchubFix GmbH	2.055	.994	Fuchs et al. (2022)
	I am very likely to buy the product from RollTec GmbH / SchubFix GmbH	1.971	.959	
	I would consider buying the product from RollTec GmbH / SchubFix GmbH	1.864	.881	
	I intend to buy the product from RollTec GmbH / SchubFix GmbH	1.963	.945	
Social Connected-ness	I feel closer to RollTec GmbH / SchubfixGmbH	1.862	.992	Fuchs et al. (2022)
	I feel more connected to RollTec GmbH / SchubfixGmbH	1.727	.944	
	I feel less distant to RollTec GmbH / SchubfixGmbH	1.597	.865	
Social Presence	There is a sense of human contact in the email	1.677	.958	Grefen & Straub
	There is a sense of personalness in the email	1.935	.968	(2004)

There is a sense of sociability in the email	1.556	.898
There is a sense of human warmth in the email	1.590	.916
There is a sense of human sensitivity in the email	1.439	.871

Table 2: Measurement Scales

To assess whether our manipulation was successful, we included a manipulation check (Pechmann, 2019; Ejelöv & Luke, 2020): "Please select the email (email A or email B) that contains the following content: A picture of a man / A handwritten signature / Personal information about the seller". Manipulation realism was assessed by "email A (RollTec GmbH) / email B (SchubFix GmbH) is very realistic (1 = do not agree at all, 7 = fully agree)". To identify and remove participants who did not respond to the questions carefully, we included a directed query (Abbey & Melroy, 2017) phrased "Please select the response option "rather agree" to confirm that you are paying attention and that you are not selecting random responses".

6. Results

6.1 Manipulation and Realism Checks

The manipulation checks indicate that our manipulations were effective: All participants in the sample assigned the personization cues (picture of a man, handwritten signature, personal information) to the correct email (for all items: $\chi^2(1) = 93.000$, $p < .001$, $\varphi = 1.000$).
The realism check showed that the mean of perceived realism is significantly higher than the neutral scale point of 4 (Email A: M = 4.68, t(92) = 3.640, p = < .001; Email B: M = 5.12, t(92) = 7.043, p = <.001), indicating that participants perceived both emails to be realistic. The emails were evaluated equally realistic ($M_{emailA} = 4.68$, $M_{emailB} = 5.12$, T(92) = -1.653, p = .102). However, the perceived realism did differ between the two conditions (Email A: $M_{personized} = 4.24$, $M_{non\text{-}personized} = 5.19$, F(1) = 6.831, p = .010; Email B: $M_{personized} = 5.54$, $M_{non\text{-}personized} = 4.63$, F(1) = 8.908, p = .004): Email A and email B were rated significantly less realistic when displayed in the personized form.

6.2 Hypothesis Testing

As hypothesized in H1, a one-way ANOVA revealed a significant difference in supplier preference across conditions: Compared to non-personized emails ($MW_{non\text{-}personized} = 3.21$, SD = 1.72), personized emails ($MW_{personized} = 4.74$, SD = 1.72) significantly (F(1, 91) = 16.240, p < .001, omega squared = .141 (strong effect size)) increased supplier preference.

We employed sequential mediation analyses (Hayes (2022) PROCESS Model 6, 5,000 bootstrap samples) which revealed that the relationship between personization and supplier preference was fully sequentially mediated by social connectedness, providing support for H2: The total effect of personization on supplier preference was significant (b=1.539; p<.001), indicating that personization positively influences supplier preference. The indirect effect of personization on supplier preference through social presence and social connectedness was significant (b=1.284, 95% CI [.721, 1.951]): Personization predicted the first mediator social presence significantly (b = 2.721, $p < .001$), which in turn had a significant effect on the second mediator social connectedness (b = .569, $p < .001$) and ultimately on supplier preference (b = 0.829, $p < .001$). Since both the direct effect of personization on supplier preference (b=−0.755; p=.143) and the indirect effects "personization → social presence → supplier preference" (b=.210, 95% CI [-.238, .777]) and "personization → social connectedness → supplier preference" (b=.593, 95% CI [-.086,

.681]) are not significant, this indicates that social connectedness fully mediates the relationship.

These findings suggest that revealing personal information significantly influences supplier preference through a stronger feeling of social presence and in turn social connectedness.

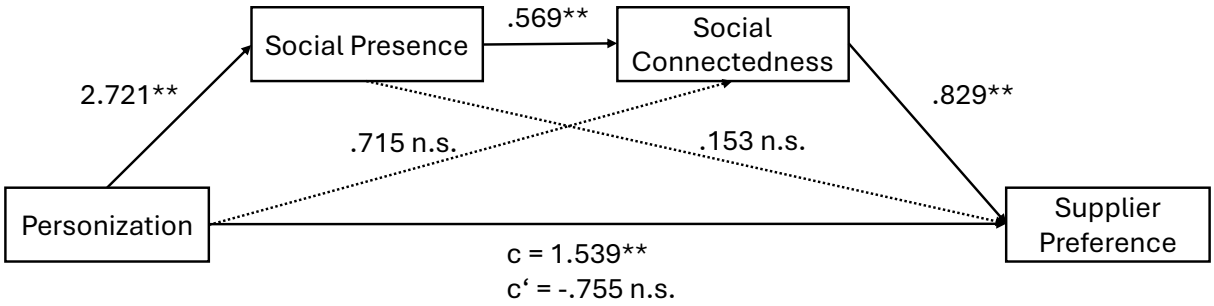

Figure 1: Results

7. Discussion

Our research adds to the literature in two ways: Firstly, we were able to demonstrate the robustness of Fuchs et al. (2022)’s results by showing that also in a B2B setting with a highly utilitarian product personization seems to significantly and positively impact supplier preference by making customers feel stronger connected to the seller. Secondly, we enhanced their model by showing that social connectedness is driven by social presence. However, although social presence increased with personization, it had no direct effect on supplier preference, highlighting that connectedness is the key mechanism in influencing purchasing decisions.

For B2B companies, our results have an important implication: Instead of anonymous emails from company accounts, B2B companies should build in personization in their digital communication with customers, as this can help to make customers feel closer to the company and through this make their offers more attractive. Since this is not particularly expensive, such measure should quickly pay off. It is interesting to note that both emails in our scenario were rated significantly less realistic when displayed in the personized form. One possible explanation might be that people are not yet used to this in B2B environments, which presents an opportunity for companies to differentiate themselves from their competitors. However, based on prior research (Herhausen et al., 2020), they should make sure that they personize employees that customers can actually contact.

We acknowledge that our study has several limitations: Firstly, due to the early stage of our research, the sample size of 93 is rather small in relation to the statistical analysis performed. Moreover, although our respondents are employees of B2B companies, they may or may not regularly interact with suppliers in their professional roles. This could influence the findings, as employees with experience of managing supplier relationships may have different expectations and perspectives to those without. Secondly, we only employed a hypothetical scenario to test our hypothesis. Finally, we only assessed preference, but did not show the actual offers. Despite these limitations, we believe that our research leads to some first insightful results that are valuable for both theory and practice and would appreciate further research. Among others, besides replicating our study with a larger sample size for different product categories, as well as adding a field experiment, a more in-depth investigation of the relationship between social presence and social connectedness seems promising. Finally, it

would be interesting to research if and to what extent personization impacts the willingness to purchase a specific offer (e.g., does it improve the perception of an objectively worse offer).

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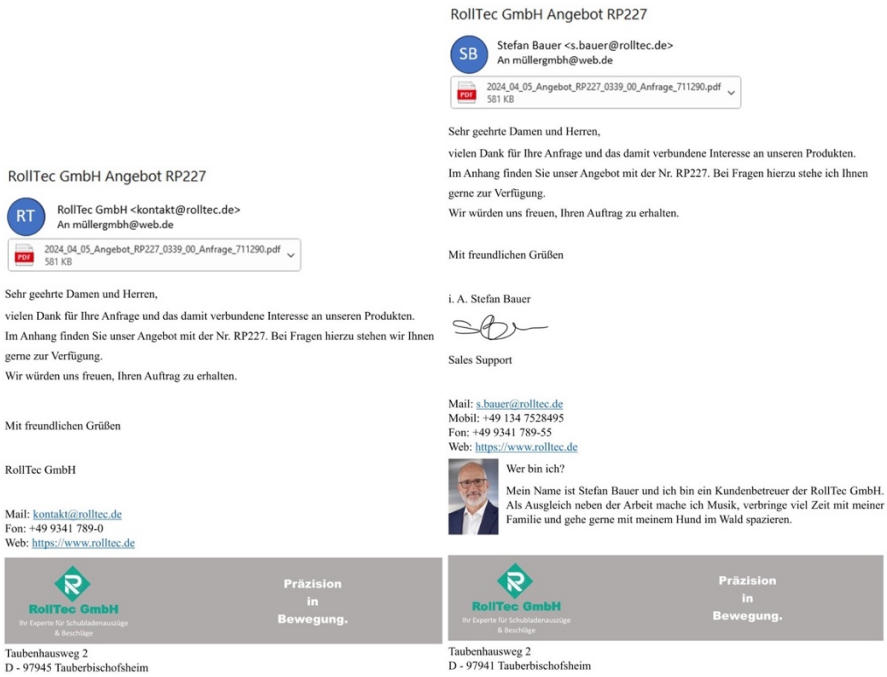
APPENDIX

Scenario:

Imagine you work in purchasing at “Müller GmbH”, a medium-sized shop and interior design company. You want to order full-extension drawer slides. The full-extension drawer slides are needed for assembling drawers (e.g. bedside table, chest of drawers, cupboard).

On the internet, you come across the two websites of RollTec GmbH and SchubFix GmbH, where you can use an online form to enter your contact details and your desired products. After sending the forms, you receive the following two e-mails with offers shortly afterwards.

Stimuli:



RollTec GmbH Angebot RP227

RT RollTec GmbH <kontakt@rolltec.de>
An müllergmbh@web.de

2024_04_05_Angebot_RP227_0339_00_Anfrage_711290.pdf
581 KB

Sehr geehrte Damen und Herren,
vielen Dank für Ihre Anfrage und das damit verbundene Interesse an unseren Produkten.
Im Anhang finden Sie unser Angebot mit der Nr. RP227. Bei Fragen hierzu stehen wir Ihnen gerne zur Verfügung.
Wir würden uns freuen, Ihren Auftrag zu erhalten.

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An müllergmbh@web.de

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Mit freundlichen Grüßen

i. A. Stefan Bauer

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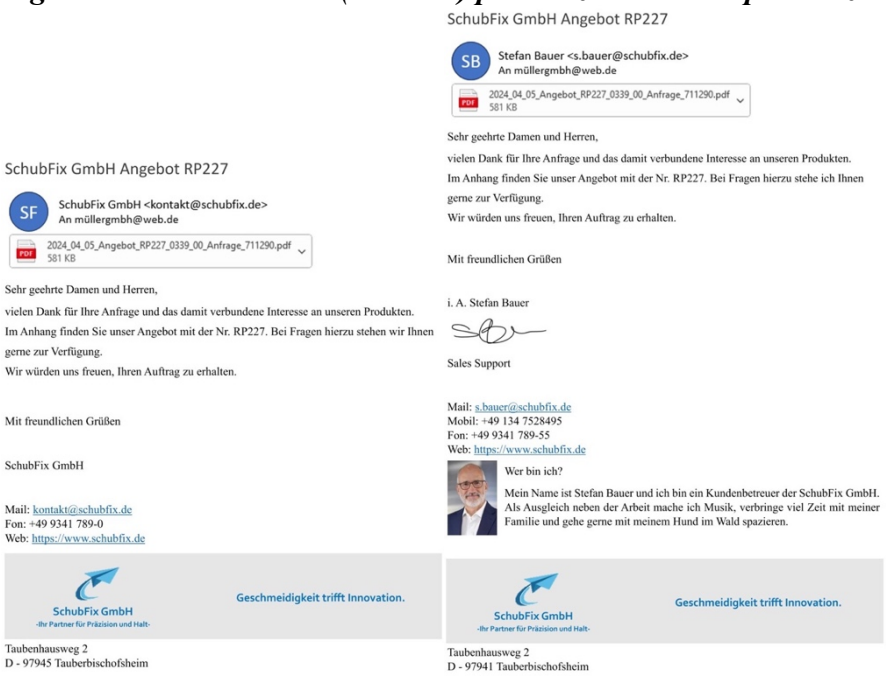
Wer bin ich?
Mein Name ist Stefan Bauer und ich bin ein Kundenbetreuer der RollTec GmbH. Als Ausgleich neben der Arbeit mache ich Musik, verbringe viel Zeit mit meiner Familie und gehe gerne mit meinem Hund im Wald spazieren.

RollTec GmbH
Präzision in Bewegung.

Taubenhausweg 2
D - 97941 Tauberbischofsheim

Figure 2: RollTec GmbH (Email A) personized and non-personized



SchubFix GmbH Angebot RP227

SF SchubFix GmbH <kontakt@schubfix.de>
An müllergmbh@web.de

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Geschmeidigkeit trifft Innovation.

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Figure 3: SchubFix GmbH (Email B) personized and non-personized