

CUSTOMER CARE – A TOTALLY IGNORED MANAGEMENT TOOL ON THE ROMANIAN SERVICES MARKET

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Abstract

Quality and customer satisfaction are important subjects receiving increasing attention worldwide. An organization's ability to remain in business depends entirely on its ability to win and retain customers. The nature and number of competitors and their ability to offer similar products/services at similar prices has led to increasing emphasis being placed on customer care. Customer care is about people pleasing people and it involves specific actions that keep customers satisfied and coming back for more.

Key words: *quality, customer satisfaction, customer care, profit.*

JEL classification: *D18, M5, M53, N3, N34, N7, N74, P46*

1. INTRODUCTION

The beginning of this new millennium marks spectacular achievements placed in the service of social needs. The existential system has become more and more technocratic and intensely pragmatic, the goods being not only logical systems, but even biological, informational, scientific and some even spiritual systems. They correspond to the materialization of the social needs; the structures, functions, properties and some components of the use values are enriching day by day, diversifying and accumulating in new products.

Every moment, the specialists in the field of advertising, politicians, mass-media, producers etc. overuse of the word "quality", the idea that „quality is a career in itself” being more and more encountered (Derek, Tanniru, 2000).

Quality defines the ability to produce and to compete on the international markets, being proud of your work and of the used management systems. It legitimates the goods and services deliverers and it is the way to exist as an economic agent.

The way to making a company profitable is very difficult and it depends not only on quality but on much more things like: continuous improvement of quality, internal and external customers' satisfaction, low costs, few failures, marketing, research-development activity and many other important things (Adas, 1997).

These concepts and principles are applicable to both small and large organizations, the difference being in their structure and scale and the concepts, principles and elements of customer care are applicable to all forms of service, whether solely of a service character or in combination with the manufacture and supply of a product.

No one doubts that long-term satisfaction with services and products can be achieved and maintained only by continuous improvement of quality and by continuously meeting customers' demands.

Taking into account all these, we think that the quality of services and customer care are essential for Romanian services and can improve the image at national and international level.

2. WHAT IS CUSTOMER CARE

Customer care is important for situations where the service is related to: (Talley, Axelroth, 2007)

- a product (for example: vehicle sales service);
- situations where there is a varying proportion of product and service content involved (for example: restaurant service);
- the service itself (technical, professional or material service), where there is no product content (for example: legal service, insurance cover).

In many of the services provided, personal contact between the provider and the customer is very important and difficult to specify accurately in terms of courtesy, etc.

The elements of this personal contact form the basis of customer care, which is being referred to as personal service, customer service, etc.

Although many companies tend to place an increasing importance on the service as their product becomes less tangible to the customer, it is accepted that service is a key determinant in choice of product. Apart from good product knowledge, technical skills and administration, the personal touch of staff dealing with customers plays a vital role in winning and retaining customers. Customers want to deal with

people they can trust (knowledge and character) and at the same time are friendly and polite to them.

Even if the price and quality of products/services are adequate, often they have only a neutral effect on the impression given to the customer. It is seldom that customers make remarks like "What a clean restaurant!" or "How quickly our meals arrived!" However, they would probably complain if the reverse happened and the restaurant was not clean and the meals were slow in arriving (Gilmore, 1984).

Frequently, when a complaint is received, it is because the customer is in a dissatisfied frame of mind (product/service deficiencies, earlier experience, etc.), but often if the personal service is good enough they will not complain.

An honest smile and full personal attention will work wonders even if problems with the product/service are experienced. The customer is left feeling that he/she has been well looked after, even if all has not gone as smoothly as might have been hoped.

Unlike products, services are more difficult to define accurately and entirely, because the service: [6]

- is not tangible - it cannot be weighed or measured and in many instances it is more emotional than rational;

- cannot be easily illustrated by a demonstrative sample;

- does not lead to the customer acquiring anything;

- is difficult to be standardized;
- is susceptible to a variety of evaluation means:

- by different people in the same cultural group;
- by people from different social, cultural and geographical backgrounds;
- by people with different levels of knowledge and experience;
- by the same person at different times and in different moods.

Customers' evaluation of service is highly dependent on their expectations prior to receiving the service. In time and with increasing competition, the nature of customer's expectations has changed. Television information, greater choice, more foreign travel, higher education standards and greater mobility have resulted in a more knowledgeable and discerning customer (Talley, Axelroth, 2007).

Customers are now less prepared to put up with unfriendly and inefficient service and as they begin to experience a better service, their expectations rise. The way in which customers are treated plays an important part in determining their loyalty to that company. Providing an efficient personal service ensures that customers become and remain loyal as regular customers (Talley, Axelroth, 2007). The relationship created with customers determines the "goodwill" customers feel towards the company and its ensuing reputation. In most cases, it is a fact that bad

experiences can destroy goodwill more than positive experiences add to it. (Heskett et al, 2006) Most people's definition of good service will be based on personal experience and expectations which can vary considerably for the same product, service and situation.

In trying to become more perceptive to customers' needs, it is a very effective way to improve by:

- creating good rapport right from the first minute;

- giving individual attention and really listening regardless of whether the message is short and sweet or long and complicated;

- reflecting back the message and summarizing to be sure of correct understanding;

- being sensitive to non-verbal communication messages and considering them as well as words.

3. MEASURING CUSTOMER SATISFACTION

Often there is a difference between the level of service aimed for and perceived by the service provider and the level of service received and evaluated by customers.

Many companies do not appreciate the vital business importance of listening to their customers to gain feedback on how they are performing. Also, monitoring customer satisfaction could be pointless exercises unless the company management is committed and will act on the results.

The main aspects for measuring are:

- analysis of the products complaints (type, zone, etc.);

- analysis of the complaints regarding raw materials, materials etc. suppliers;

- guarantee and other costs of complaints solving.

Measuring customers' satisfaction, include:

- *reactive methods*: monitoring complaints and compliments;

- *proactive methods*: various means to solicit information on the customers' satisfaction.

These proactive methods are in the form of customer surveys that must be designed and implemented carefully in order to derive the desired benefits. Therefore, each method should include considerations for (Adas, 1997):

- deciding which areas of customer satisfaction to measure;

- deciding the sampling method;

- conducting the research;

- analyzing and interpreting the results;

- acting of the results indicators;

Some proactive methods include:

- questionnaires at service location;
- postal questionnaires;
- telephone surveys;
- face to face interviews;
- mystery shoppers.

Questionnaires at service location:

- advantages: relatively easy to implement; demonstrate to both customers and staff that the company is serious about the service it provides, etc.

- disadvantages: completion rates can be low; are open to abuse by staff, etc.

Questionnaires should be laid out such as to motivate customers in completing them, such as:

- having a logical sequence;
- presenting easy and general questions before more difficult, specific and/or sensitive ones, etc.

Postal questionnaires:

- advantages: a more systematic understanding of customers' opinions; provide feedback from customers who may not visit the company site/office; are easy to organize and reach a large number of customers in a fast time span;

- disadvantages: can be expensive, particularly if response rates are high; may require costly administration for maintaining customer data accurate etc. (Bennekom, 2002).

Effective postal surveys:

- are addressed to customers on a personal note;
- include some reward incentive for completion;
- offer customer confidentiality;
- are laid out to understand and complete easily;
- include a prepaid envelope for return.

Telephone surveys: advantages: first hand and quick response on customers' experiences; it can also be a useful and cost effective Public Relations exercise; speed of response; allows for more subtle questioning; could be used to design effective postal or telephone surveys; disadvantages: invasion of privacy; difficult for a lengthy interview; some quick/poorly-considered answers; can be costly (Payson, 1994)

Mystery shoppers:

- advantages: useful to supplement customer feedback; allows first hand evaluations of the welcome from staff, their attentiveness and work atmosphere;

- disadvantages: cannot be applied to all service types; may have different perceptions than customers themselves; create for many staff the unpleasant impression of being spied upon etc. (Bennekom, 2002)

There are also other methods for soliciting customers' opinions like Free Phone Lines, Suggestion Schemes, Customer/User Groups, Third Party Surveys, etc.

4. MONITORING COMPLAINTS AND COMPLIMENTS

The monitoring of complaints and compliments is the traditional, and often the only means companies adopt to monitor customers' reactions to their service levels. However, the measurement of complaints and compliments is often misleading, as on average only a small percentage of customers actually bother to complain and even fewer to compliment a company.

Taking into account all these, the main purpose of a company is to stimulate its clients to communicate it all their dissatisfactions and complaints because these generate many advantages, like (Redeş et al, 1995):

- *extra profits* - the complaints that arrive at the company represent only the top of an iceberg: only 1% of unsatisfied clients complain for their cheap products and about 50% from the clients who paid very big prices;

- *ideas for new products* - complaints reflect the way the clients are unsatisfied because of the products, the motives for which the clients expectations hadn't been fulfill;

- *information regarding products performances* - complaints reflect the way the clients use the products. If this is not the correct way means that even the acquiring information of the potential clients failed;

- *improvement of the relations with distributors* - many vendors are not organized to solve the clients' complaints and dislike to be accused for the nonconforming quality of the sold goods. They will be delighted to do business with that producers that wait the complaints at their headquarters;

- *improving the company image* - a good solving complaints system can generate consumers' loyalty for the company;

- *well educated clients* - many complaints come from the consumers that don't read the products instructions or misunderstand them. If the Complaints Solving Department can guide the clients with tact, many of them will answer in a positive way and will read instructions more carefully in future.

All companies, no matter their size, small or big, have to action in order to change an unsatisfied client in a satisfied one. That's why, all complaints must be effective and very quickly solved, in order to reestablish the clients' trust for the company. A complete complaints solving system must include the following elements:

- *generation of the complaints* - may be paradoxical or at least strange, but a company must encourage the complaints because all these are just free information and act as results of marketing researches. The address, telephone numbers and a name of a contact person must be visible on products instructions, on labels or on packages;

- *input system* - no matter how the complaints will arrive at the company, by mail or by phone, the

company must establish a system and reunite all these in a daily register. One of the major causes of the consumers' dissatisfaction is the quiet of the company at a specific complaint. Finally, the complaints must be classified on categories in order to see if they are or not the effect of a serious problem;

- *responding system* – the classified complaints must be investigated and the answer addressed to the unsatisfied client is an obligation;

- *internal necessary corrective actions* – the value of a complaints system is the result of objective information and of the way in which the client perceives the product quality. To obtain a profit, it is necessary for the company to have a system of corrective actions. In many cases, the complaints can highlight an well known problem, but in other cases, they can be the first signal of a serious change of product quality;

- *managerial system* – complaints will be monitored as any other information.

5. CONCLUSIONS

It is well known the fact that no business can exist without customers. In any business, it is important to work closely to your clients to make sure that the system you have created for them is as close to their needs/requirements as you can manage. Because it is critical to develop a close working relationship with your clients, customer care is of a vital importance. What follows is a selection of tips that will make your clients feel valued, wanted and loved. Customer care, like any other aspect of business, is a practiced art that takes time and effort to master. All you need to do to achieve this is to stop and switch roles with the customer. What would you want from your business if you were the client? How would you want to be treated? Treat your customers like your friends and they will always come back.

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