Service Routines, Technology and Service Delivery: Focusing on the Telco Frontline

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Abstract

This exploratory study gave an insight into the effect that service routines and technology had on the ability of frontline employees from a large Australian telecommunications company to deliver effective service to call centre customers. The study highlighted that for simple and timely service routines to occur, product lines and support services needed to be compatible with both the technology provided and frontline employees’ expertise in using the technology. When this occurred, simple and timely service routines appeared to follow, which equated to higher quality service and better customer satisfaction. On the other hand, when this did not occur frontline employees were often forced to unwillingly deliver poor service to customers. The comments of the frontline staff provide an interesting window into the potentially high cost for any organization that does not understand the power that frontline employees have to build or break a business.

Introduction

An increasing number of businesses have installed call centres as a means of integrating their services and sales functions when dealing with large numbers of customers via remote, real-time contact. Such companies have begun to focus more overtly on their core competencies, which are ‘maximizing human capital, technology utilization and outsourcing’ (Dobbins, 1996, p. 46). By adopting a relationship-oriented marketing approach, these organizational units, which have as their primary task the processing of inbound and outbound communications with customers and prospects, are rapidly becoming a key source of customer-specific knowledge and the direct conduit to sales. Furthermore, it has been argued that call centres are an important source of competitive advantage (Dobbins 1996) and thus are indispensable to many companies, and that the frontline employees whose role is largely concerned with telephone contact between themselves and the organization’s customers are vital to an organization’s success.

The frontline employee is a critical player in the internal marketing philosophy where an organization aims to satisfy its employees just as it aims to satisfy its external customers (Gummesson, 1987; George, 1990; Berry and Parasuraman, 1991; Thomson, 1991). The internal marketing concept implies that an organization’s internal customer is equally as important as its external customers (Berry, 1982; Green, Walls and Schrest, 1994). Internal customers such as frontline staff, have been defined as employees within organizations that depend on other employees to have their needs and wants met, whereas external customers are defined as individuals and businesses that purchase goods and services from an organization (Zeithaml and Bitner, 2000). Studies have shown that satisfied internal customers provide superior service for external customers (Schneider and Bowen, 1984; Lovelock, 1992; Sergeant and Frenkel, 2000). A constantly improving work environment inevitably results in higher levels of customer satisfaction and sales volumes (Johnson and Seymour, 1985; Bitran and Hoech, 1990). Sasser and Arbet (1976) believed that an organization ‘must first sell the job to employees before it can sell its services to customers’ (p. 64). Grönroos (1981) supported this view when he suggested that employees must individually accept the services and other activities of the organisation before they can actively support the service during
their contacts with customers. Employees will produce their best performance when they personally believe in what an organization is striving to achieve (Berry, 1981). Significant back-stage activities such as computer systems support, that maintain the ‘tools’ of frontline staff in call centres are imperative, whereby support units and senior management take a behind-the-scenes role and ‘ embrace the roles of supporter, helper and enabler’ (Albrecht, 1988, p. 108). The term back-stage or back-office was often referred to in connection with parts of the organization that are invisible to customers (Grönroos, 1990; Lovelock, 1992) and vital to enabling frontline staff to perform effectively (Grönroos, 1989) and to building job satisfaction (Chebat and Kollias 2000).

Staff need to be adequately trained and developed in the goods/services on offer, service routines and technology (Zeithaml, Parasuraman and Berry, 1990; Davis, 1993). This is vital, as employees will be reluctant to perform the tasks they do not feel equipped to handle (Berry and Parasuraman, 1991). Expecting staff to perform beyond their capability normally results in them feeling uncertain, angry and frustrated (Grönroos, 2000). Berry and Parasuraman (1991) stated that although employees receive training, it is often not adequate, or not the kind of training that is required. They stated that employees ‘may receive technical skills training, but they do not receive enough knowledge; they learn how but not why’ and that organizations often make the mistake of viewing the training of employees as an event rather than an ongoing process (p.159).

With ongoing training, ‘appropriate and reliable technology must [also] be provided for high quality service delivery’ (Zeithaml, Berry and Parasuraman, 1988, p. 42). Gummesson (1994) contends that the designing of services involves a rigorous analysis of activities, processes and interactions, which (among other things) includes reviewing the important role technology will play. He considers technology to be one of the ‘dynamic drawings’ of the service delivery process (p. 85). This therefore implies that endorsing a customer-focus is not enough; an organization must be equipped with skilled staff and provide appropriate resources.

The aim of this study was to gain a detailed insight into the factors related to service routines and technology that affected a frontline employee’s ability to deliver service to customers in a telecommunications company’s call centre. Many of the dynamics and forces addressed in the literature were at play and the choice of a telecommunications call centre was reinforced by the fact that only a limited body of research existed in such a setting, especially with an emphasis on frontline employees. Parasuraman, Zeithaml and Berry (1988) dedicated part of a study to analysing the factors affecting frontline employees’ ability to deliver service in a bank setting. With the rapid growth in the development of call centres, studies of factors affecting service delivery will provide important insights into their operation. With these issues in mind the following research question was posed for a pilot study, in relation to a section of the telecommunications call centre: How do the service routines and technology affect frontline employees’ customer-oriented behaviours and attitudes when delivering service to customers of the call centre?

**Methodology**

As a pilot study was required to gain a better understanding of how service routines and technology affected frontline employees’ behaviours and attitudes when delivering service to customers, the focus group approach was selected as an appropriate methodology. The group
situation ensures that high quality data representative of the context of the study, is gained through the interaction, sharing of ideas and confirmation of experience (Madriz, 1995). The focus group enables the researcher to listen to participants discuss their experiences and attitudes in a relaxed environment, without them feeling intimidated (Morgan, 1998). As the aim of the study was to conduct research ‘on a contemporary phenomenon within some real-life context’ (Yin, 1989, p. 13) the focus group within the call centre context was organised. The focus group consisted of nine individuals selected at random from a list of the seven night-teams that operated within one section of the call centre. Within the section of the call centre studied in this pilot, a frontline employee typically fulfilled two roles. They participated in outbound call campaigns to targeted segments of the organization’s customers and they received inbound calls from customers, as well as being required to attend to their account-specific needs and enquiries. Hence, either role could involve the ordering and cancelling of certain product lines, as well as administrative-type duties, such as updating and modifying customers’ details, all of which were facilitated via the use of a computer system. The moderator of the focus group ensured that the room was an appropriate size and contained a whiteboard and audio recording equipment (Edmunds, 1999). The participants were given a short briefing, which outlined the basic topics and procedure to be covered during the focus group discussion.

Service Routines, Technology and Service Delivery: findings from the research

In exploring the research question, the study investigated how service routines and technology affected frontline employees when delivering service to customers. In the organization studied, their ability to exercise ‘quick and flexible decision-making’ when dealing with customers (Grönroos, 2000, p. 363) was impaired either by poor service routines, or by slow and inadequate technological support. Therefore, the internal marketing concept was not ‘geared towards service-oriented management and implementation of external relationships with customers and other parties’ (Grönroos, 2000, p. 334). In some situations, so that service routines could be completed, customers were either put on hold or inconvenienced in other ways that made either the frontline employee or the customer feel uncomfortable.

“There is a process…you go and put the customer on hold but it is never exactly the way you should be doing it. You have to keep them talking.”

This time ranged from a few minutes, to a query that would take about one week to handle.

“If I tell the customer it is going to take 7 days and you check [after 7 days]…they still haven’t been given [the goods]…you email back-of-house and then you email your [supervisor] and finally it gets done…19 days since you promised the customer”

Another respondent suggested that service routines became complicated when frontline employees were inadequately informed of how to perform them, and when the training was not adequate and they ‘do not receive enough knowledge; they learn how but not why’ (Berry and Parasuraman, 1991, p. 159). The training and the design of the intranet clearly did not meet the needs of the front line employees as illustrated below:

“You read through a product (on the Intranet)…you have no idea at the end of it what is going on. I basically sat down with somebody who knew about it and they explained it all”.

As a result, customers did not receive the highest possible levels of service.

“You often don’t really know what you are doing…if we are trained in it, fine, but it would be good to be able to do more, we could serve the customers better.”
For empowerment to function effectively, the frontline employees needed to be adequately trained and developed in the goods/services, service routines and technology in accordance with the findings of Davis (1989) and Davis (1993). Davis (1989) stated that, “customer satisfaction depends upon the enabling tools provided the customer service representatives” (p. 13). Two participants indicated that time-consuming service routines occurred due to unreliable and inappropriate technology, and they suggested that this affected customers’ perceptions of the organization:

“Yeah keep talking, not much longer, I am just getting my system on, oh my system is a bit slow…you get customers who are like, that would be right…”

Participants appeared to have little confidence in the service routines or technology. This lack of confidence appeared to force frontline employees to offer little assurance to customers that their needs or wants would be satisfied:

“…you say to the customer well I have ordered it but don’t take it for gospel that it is on your account until you see it in black and white.”

The technology was often inappropriate because new products had been introduced too quickly. This meant that the products and the technology were incompatible, which in turn compromised the reliability of service received by customers.

“…when we started using it, it wasn’t ready, but because of outside pressure they rushed it through and it still doesn’t work…a couple of other things they have rushed through…and customers hate it when you have to call them back.”

Further, the computers were often slow in displaying important legal information used to verify customers’ identities, and that this was another source of frustration for them.

“…waiting for a customer’s name to come up, it has taken a couple of minutes to come up.”

Most participants also criticised the organization’s Intranet tool for its lack of clear and comprehensive information.

“It (the Intranet) is very difficult to get around, it is a very bad web design”, or, “[name of Intranet] is just a bullshit tool…it’s a propaganda tool”, and “to me hasn’t got the information”.

High quality service delivery was clearly thwarted, as the ‘appropriate and reliable technology’ was not provided, supporting the findings of Zeithaml, Berry and Parasuraman (1988, p. 42). This issue needs to be addressed, as the frontline employees and supervisors were reliant on the Intranet as a source of information during service routines. The employees did not feel at all supported, assisted or enabled and therefore this affected their level of empowerment to fulfill their work role and job satisfaction supporting the findings of previous studies (Albrecht, 1988; Chebat and Kollias, 2000). At the times when frontline employees came across enquiries that did not fall within their realm of expertise, they referred the enquiry to the appropriate area within the organization. This was done either by direct phone transfer (inbound), or by supplying the customer with the applicable contact number (outbound).

“…if you don’t have enough information on [name of Intranet]…then of course the next step is to go to your [supervisor], but when your [supervisor] has to look on [name of Intranet]…then it is either a problem that you have to handball or say sorry I will have to refer you to another department and a lot of people don’t want to know about it.”

Uncertainty, anger and frustration were well in evidence here, coupled with inefficient use of technology and dis-empowered staff.
Discussion and Conclusions

These results showed that the frontline call centre staff in this section, were often forced to place customers on hold or call them back, often more than 2 weeks later, so that time-consuming and often unsatisfactory service routines could be performed. Computer systems were not user-friendly, as they were slow, unreliable, and sometimes incompatible with products on offer. Likewise, frontline employees required technical expertise so that technology could be operated efficiently. Further, the Intranet’s lack of essential information meant that customers did not always have their enquiry attended to, and were in turn “handballed” to another person or department. Therefore, it seemed for simple and timely service routines to occur, products needed to be compatible with both the technology provided and frontline employees’ expertise in using the technology (Lovelock, 1992). When this occurred, it equated to higher quality service and better customer satisfaction.

Frontline employees stated that products were often introduced before the technology had been adequately tested. Similarly, one frontline employee described having to place customers on hold for as long as five minutes to determine how the technology facilitated the completion of certain service routines. More effective management of marketing at a strategic level requires the development of appropriate structural mechanisms and policy frameworks to ensure a co-ordinated approach to the management of market relationships. To do this, the company needs to integrate front-line staff into the marketing process. Collaboration between marketing and operations departments can help ensure new products are introduced in accordance with appropriate technology, proper description to front line employees, and within frontline employees’ technical expertise. This can subsequently facilitate both simple and timely service routines and effective service delivery. It is fundamental that operations personnel ensure that any incompatible technology is identified and adapted or replaced to produce a good fit with the organization’s products. In doing so, supervisors must ensure that frontline employees possess the technical expertise to use the technology most efficiently and thus empower them to satisfy customers and make sales. The case study also revealed that the organization’s Intranet played an important role. The development of technology such as Intranets can allow frontline employees to deliver better service, as accurate information can be accessed quickly for customers during service routines. However, as indicated in this exploratory study, if an Intranet is to be developed as a supplementary support tool, it must be both comprehensible and user-friendly for frontline employees. An Intranet is of little value if this does not occur, and can be particularly detrimental to customer satisfaction in situations such as this one, as a lack of skills and knowledge saw supervisors and frontline employees rely heavily on the Intranet for information during service routines. Further studies of this phenomenon across other sections of the call center are warranted based on the impact that these issues were reportedly having on sales. In summary, the message from this study was that for frontline call centre staff to maximise sales and service, much closer attention is needed to the detail of their service routines; their training; and the provision of technology that allows for superior internal and external communication.
References


