Sales or lost sales? An insight into the marketing barriers affecting frontline employees’ satisfaction and attitudinal commitment in a fashion retail outlet.

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Abstract
This paper discusses some of the findings from exploratory research that provided an insight into the marketing barriers affecting frontline employees’ satisfaction and attitudinal commitment in the context of a fashion retail outlet in Melbourne. Frontline employees represent the ‘face’ of an organisation (Hoffman and Bateson 1997) and they play a key role in satisfying customers’ expectations, and thus in influencing the service quality perceptions which emanate from service encounters (Boshoff and Mels 1995; Bendapudi and Berry 1997; Grönroos 2001). Boshoff and Allen (2000) showed that in order to provide consistently high levels of service, frontline employees must be trained to deal with customers and be able to rectify the inevitable problems that may arise. Factors such as the attitudes and behaviours of management as well as the training and the empowerment they receive, can also influence the performance of frontline employees (Matthes 1992). To gain an insight into these issues, a focus group was conducted with casual frontline employees and depth interviews were conducted with their managers, at a fashion retail outlet in Melbourne. The findings suggested that a possible link could exist between frontline employees’ satisfaction and their attitudinal commitment, as they described low levels of satisfaction and attitudinal commitment towards the fashion retail outlet they worked for. These negative job attitudes were primarily attributable to the managers’ attitudes and behaviours; a lack of empowerment; as well as inadequate internal communication, and training. Further research is needed to gain a greater understanding of the complex nature of the effects that such marketing barriers could have on frontline employees’ satisfaction and attitudinal commitment to their job.

Introduction
The concept of internal marketing suggests that the way to satisfied customers is through satisfied employees (Bitner 1990; Grönroos 1981, 1998). Frontline employees have to feel that management has met their needs before they can focus on meeting the needs of external customers (Barnes and Morris 2000). As a result, frontline employees play a key role in satisfying customers’ expectations and thus in influencing the service quality perceptions which emanate from service encounters (Boshoff and Mels 1995; Bendapudi and Berry 1997; Grönroos 2001). It is the frontline employee who usually has the first, and many times the only contact with the customer, thus to the customer this individual represents the ‘face’ of the organisation (Hoffman and Bateson 1997). In support of this concept Bowen, Siehl, and Schneider (1989) contended that the customer’s perception of the quality of service received is affected by the behaviour of the person delivering the service. Organisations must not only ensure that frontline employees are satisfied but also that they are committed to satisfying the expectations of their customers (Boshoff and Tait 1996). Committed employees are generally
believed to contribute to the organisation in more positive ways than their uncommitted counterparts (Meyer and Allen 1991). Zeithaml, Parasuraman and Berry (1990) identified marketing barriers such as role conflict and role ambiguity that are closely related to frontline employees’ job satisfaction and commitment, that can also preclude the frontline employees’ attainment of satisfaction and commitment in their jobs.

Job satisfaction has been defined as ‘a primary outcome of work experiences that meet valued needs of individuals and thus represent a key indicator of quality of work life’ (Igbaria and Parasuraman 1994, p. 175). Attitudinal commitment refers to the psychological attachment or affective commitment formed by an employee in relation to his or her identification and involvement with the organisation (Meyer and Allen 1991). Mowday, Porter and Steers (1982) proposed three sets of influences that affect frontline employees’ satisfaction and attitudinal commitment, which were personal influences, non-organisational factors, and organisational factors. This paper will primarily focus on organisational factors such as supervision and organisational policies and procedures (Mowday, Porter and Steers 1982), and the effect that they can have on frontline employees. Grönroos (1994) and Gummesson (1994) linked the marketing of services with the overall management of the organisation. Service management is commonly viewed as a ‘management perspective that fits today’s competitive situation’ (Grönroos 1994, p. 5), focusing on the concept of customers’ interests while highlighting the importance of employees’ efforts in delivering service quality to the customer. Based on these definitions, Grönroos (1994) highlighted five key elements of service management, which were: the overall management perspective; a customer focus; a holistic approach (within the whole organisation); a quality focus; and internal development (p.7). Grönroos (1994) recognised that teamwork, inter-functional collaboration and inter-organisational partnerships were inherent in service management. Heskett et al. (1994) suggested that a link exists between internal service quality, employee satisfaction, their productivity, and external customer satisfaction and organisational performance. There is now a body of empirical research supporting this model, which establishes a relationship between employee attitudes and customer attitudes (Schneider and Bowen 1985, 1993).

Although the significance of frontline employees is uncontested, Hartline and Ferelle (1993) observed that frontline employees are often underpaid, under trained, overworked and highly stressed. The abandonment of frontline employees’ needs by management could be extremely damaging to an organisation given that frontline employees are not likely to treat customers any better than how they perceive their organisation treats them (Weitzel, Swarzkopf and Peach 1989). Blume (1988) stated that improving customer service is an organisation-wide effort, not only involving the people who have face-to-face contact with customers, but also involving the people who serve customers indirectly and the system that delivers the service. Foreman and Money (1995) concluded that all employees are part of the internal market and they should adopt a customer orientation. In support of this, Gummesson (1991) developed the concept of ‘part-time marketers’, which referred to those employees who are not normally trained as marketers, but who take care of customer contacts and thus impact on the purchasing behaviour of the organisation’s customers. The part time marketer concept therefore signified that a focus on customer orientation should filter through the entire organisation regardless of one’s position in that organisation.

There is little doubt that the quality of leadership provided by middle management will have a significant influence on the customer orientation, and on the service quality provided by employees (Grönroos 1990; Zeithaml, Parasuraman and Berry 1990). Schneider (1980) contended that people who choose to work in service organisations generally have a strong
desire to give good service. However, Bitner, Booms and Lois (1994) believed frontline employees were often unable to satisfy customers’ needs due to constraints placed on them by laws or their own organisation’s rules and procedures, ‘requiring even the most basic decisions to be made by management only’ (Boshoff and Allen 2000, p. 63). Bowen and Lawler (1992) suggested that the empowerment of frontline employees is essential in instilling a true customer orientation, as they are the closest to the customer and they are in the best position to determine what action is required. As workers assume more control over their work, higher morale and higher job satisfaction will result (Naumann, Jackson and Rosenbaum 2001; Rafiq and Ahmed 2000). However, managers are often reluctant to empower their employees for fear they will give too much away to the customer (Bowen and Lawler 1992) and because of their inherent trepidation at the prospect of relinquishing their power and control (Berry, Zeithaml, and Parasuraman 1990). A central cause of any barriers to empowerment therefore lies in the attitudes and behaviours of management (Matthes 1992). Boshoff and Allen (2000) believed that in order to consistently provide high levels of service, frontline employees must be trained to deal with customers and to rectify the inevitable problems that arise. According to Carr (1990) training was an important part of any program to motivate customer-orientated behaviour. While Berry and Parasuraman (1992) recognised the importance of developing an extensive training program, they revealed that managers often failed to effectively implement one, asserting that ‘employees often return from training and education experiences, enthusiastic about applying new skills and knowledge only to confront a lack of managerial support’ (p.25). Carr (1990), and Berry and Parasuraman (1992) stressed that frontline employees need to learn continuously, as learning is a confidence builder, a motivation force, and a source of self-esteem. Based on this, the research question was to gain an insight into the marketing barriers that could affect frontline employees’ satisfaction and attitudinal commitment in the context of a fashion retail outlet.

Methodology

In conducting this exploratory research, a case study approach was chosen comprising a focus group and two in-depth interviews. The focus group consisted of six frontline employees of a fashion retail outlet in Melbourne, and it was supported by depth interviews with the outlet’s store manager and with the assistant manager. The exploratory case study approach was chosen because it supported the authors’ aim ‘to find out what is happening and seek new insights’ into the research question (Robson 1993, p. 42). Denzin and Lincoln (2000) contended that the combination of multiple qualitative research methods, such as focus groups and depth interviews, adds ‘rigor, breadth, complexity, richness and depth to an inquiry’ (p.5). A further reason for selecting a focus group method was to reflect the methodologies used in previous studies. A judgemental sample was used for the focus group, in accordance with Miles and Huberman (1994) who showed that qualitative samples such as this should generally be judgmental rather than random, because ‘with small numbers of cases, random sampling can deal you a decidedly biased hand’ (p.27). The focus group participants were all females aged between 18 and 25 years of age, and on average had three years of casual work experience with the fashion retail outlet. The participants for the depth interviews were also female, aged between 25 and 30 years of age, full-time employees, who had been managing the fashion retail outlet for an average of two years. In analysing the findings, the discussions were transcribed and a summary of the main themes was prepared in accordance with the literature. While it could be argued that the generalisability of the case study approach is limited, this research provides interesting and valuable insights into the research question and forms the basis for further research into the issues raised.
Findings from the research

Most of the frontline employees in the focus group were not satisfied or committed to their job: “I don’t think I’m committed... this job is not my first priority, it’s just to earn some extra money on the weekends”. While one frontline employee was satisfied with her job, this was primarily because of her enjoyment of the social interaction that this job entailed, though she expressed a lack of attitudinal commitment towards the organisation: “I’m quite satisfied at work, I like interacting with everyone and even with customers, but I can’t say I’m committed. I guess I only like it because it’s such an easy job and I don’t have to put much effort in”.

While not all frontline employees expressed negative feelings towards their jobs, many experienced feelings of dissatisfaction and a subsequent lack of attitudinal commitment, which was largely confirmed by management: “I think about 70% of the girls are not committed, they’re just not enthusiastic, it’s like they don’t want to be here”. Further discussion revealed that their lack of satisfaction and attitudinal commitment was a product of managerial behaviours and attitudes, their lack of empowerment, and the lack of effective training and communication from management. “The attitude of the managers really has an influence on my satisfaction at work, it seems as though [name of manager] doesn’t really care about us or the work we do”. Even the training sessions were an issue, as they were considered inadequate, and did not address the issues and knowledge that the employees required to perform their jobs effectively. The lack of empowerment resulted in feelings of dissatisfaction and despair. “…I don’t think that the training program was all that effective. I’ve never actually felt clear on what exactly I should be doing ...When I see a customer with a lay-by slip I still nervously avoid them because I ‘still’ don’t know how to process them ...I feel like an idiot”. Their lack of commitment was also attributable to the lack of effective communication they received from management: “I just feel like I don’t really know what’s going on, every time I come into work everything has changed...managers should just give you a quick briefing of the changes when we come in”. The importance of good management at all levels was highlighted by the following comment: “I think how satisfied I am and how committed I am to [name of organisation] really depends on [name of store manager] and [name of assistant manager]...whether they’re supportive or appreciative of the work I do”.

Managers’ responses revealed that they too understood the importance of fostering and nurturing a supportive and considerate environment within the organisation: “I think probably the most important thing is to always be considerate towards them. When it comes to doing rosters and things I try to be as fair as I can while making sure the girls have an equal amount of shifts or if someone needs a day off or needs an extra shift or needs a little extra money that week I try and shuffle the roster”. The frontline employees revealed that while managers appeared to recognise the importance of support and being considerate, such management techniques were rarely practiced. In fact, it seemed that the managers were quite insensitive to the feelings of their frontline employees: “I had an experience with one of my managers. When a close family member had passed away and I was really upset, I spoke to her about it and told her about it only to have it turned against me. She told the supervisor I had been letting my personal life affect my performance and that my sales had been dropping”. This type of attitude was common among these frontline employees who felt that management treated them in an unfair and disrespectful manner, without compassion. Two frontline employees explained how management’s insensitive behaviour subsequently had adverse ramifications on their commitment to the organisation and even instigated inclinations to quit: “… less committed I think, because if I’m not getting the hours that I want
or I feel that I've been treated unfairly and I will definitely start looking for work elsewhere...especially if it gets to a point where the relationship with my manager is affecting my hours”.

Conclusions

This exploratory research of the fashion retail outlet suggested that employers and managers that abandon their frontline employees’ needs could be damaging their organisation’s reputation, given that frontline employees, who represent the ‘face’ of the organisation (Hoffman and Bateson 1997), are not likely to treat customers any better than how they perceive their organisation treats them (Weitzel, Swarzkopf and Peach 1989). After analyzing the transcripts from the focus groups, it appeared that the frontline employees in the fashion retail outlet were neither satisfied nor committed to their jobs, which ultimately resulted in low levels of motivation, job satisfaction and organisational commitment (Bitner, Booms and Tetreault 1990). This appeared to have been primarily attributable to the following themes: the retail outlet’s managers did not seem to show respect for the frontline employees; the employees were not empowered to deal with many of the situations that arose when they were at work; and the training and communication provided by management to the employees was not considered satisfactory. In accordance with Barnes and Morris (2000), the research indicated that frontline employees in a fashion retail outlet needed to feel that management has met their needs before they can focus on meeting the needs of their customers. To achieve this, they felt that they needed to be properly trained and to work in a well managed and a non-stressful environment, in accordance with Hartline and Ferelle’s (1993) observation. However, in contrast to Hartline and Ferelle’s (1993) observation, this research did not indicate that the salary paid to the frontline employees’ was a factor in their satisfaction or commitment to the outlet.

It was interesting to note that the store’s management believed, in contrast to the comments made by the frontline employees, that they were considerate of the personal requirements of their employees, and that they believed that the training programs for their staff were adequate. The depth interviews showed support for the research conducted by Bowen and Lawler (1992) as these managers were reluctant to empower their employees for fear they will give too much away to the customer, and because of their apparent trepidation at the prospect of relinquishing their power and control (Berry, Zeithaml, and Parasuraman 1990). This research, however, did not support previous research suggesting that managers could exert a crucial influence on employees’ satisfaction and willingness to work towards and accept organisational goals (Boshoff and Mels 1995). In fact, the research showed support for Matthes (1992) work, which showed that a central cause of any barriers to empowerment lies in the attitudes and behaviour of management.

Therefore, it could be implied from this research that an extensive and practical training regime aimed at enhancing employees’ skills and knowledge as well as improved communication between management and employees, could help to increase frontline employees’ satisfaction and attitudinal commitment in a retail fashion outlet. This could ultimately improve the service they offered to their customers. Retail outlets need to remember that their frontline employees are ‘part-time marketers’, and that management needs to encourage two-way communication with their employees and create a supportive and open work environment. Considering these exploratory findings, the authors hope that the initial insights gained through this study will stimulate additional research towards a more
complete understanding of the complex nature of the effects that marketing barriers can have on frontline employees’ satisfaction and attitudinal commitment in a fashion retail outlet.

References


