



Excellent customer service is planned

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Excellent customer service is more than just plastic smiles and hollow greetings; it requires thoughtful design and hard management thinking. The shortage of good examples would suggest these skills are not in abundance. Combining excellent customer service and a profitable business is hard work - at least this is some of the thinking to emerge from the customer service research conducted by the Harold Pupkewitz Graduate School of Business (HP-GSB). Upon asking ourselves what happens in a service encounter, we have discovered that it can be characterised as an exchange between customers and suppliers containing five key dimensions all contributing to the exchange to a greater or lesser degree. These dimensions are illustrated in The Service Exchange Model [HP-GSB]. The model suggests that the various components of a service exchange are:

Deliverables: the product or outcome the customer expects from the service. This is the main purpose for the customer to engage with the supplier e.g. a passport application at Home Affairs.

Information: is often required to make the service encounter work. For a passport application, for instance, the custom-

er may have to provide an identity number or other personal details.

Value: often this is simply money or the price paid for a service- particularly in a situation where no information is required like obtaining a haircut. Continuing with the passport example, a first application may be provided for free but subsequent ones may carry an additional fee.

Time: the period from the commencement of the service encounter to receipt of the deliverable. This includes queuing time- a point overlooked by many suppliers.

Experience: The intangible aspect of the service encounter mentioned earlier. It is influenced by the attitude of the service staff, it is a summation of the other dimensions and dictates how the customer feels about the service overall.

At the HP-GSB, what our research is telling us is that service quality is where the perceived service exchange exceeds the expectation.

For service quality to be achieved it requires service managers and front line service staff to pay attention to all five dimensions of the service exchange. To illustrate the importance of the service exchange model and its dimensions, take the following example. Recently I took a long-haul flight. I pre-booked my seat through a travel agent six months in ad-

vance. On the day of departure, I arrived at the airport and found that my flight had been rescheduled to the following day and that the agent had been informed three months earlier. The agent had however, failed to inform me. I tried unsuccessfully, to reason with the airline ground staff pointing out that I was the customer and that I was the one being inconvenienced. The compromise I wanted was that they should cover the cost of my travel to and from the airport and they should then recover that cost from their agent. The airline staff refused, citing company policy and proceeded to book me on the flight for the following morning, instructing me to contact the agent to sort out any issues. Analysing this service encounter using the exchange model, it identifies some key weaknesses in the airline's service. The deliverable for me is obtaining a flight on a particular day and time. The fact that I had booked six months in advance meant that time was also an important aspect of this exchange. The airline failed to recognise me as their customer, not verbally, but procedurally. Their system had collected information about the agent (phone number and email) and not the customer's (my number and email), therefore relying on the agent to convey important information to their customer. This customer confusion was further compounded by the airline not taking ownership and deal-

ing with my situation- instead constantly referring me back to the agent and hiding behind company policy.

Looking at the value dimension of the service exchange, by far the largest portion of my ticket price was going to the airline. Therefore, to treat me as if I was not their customer but the agent's was quite offensive. Finally, though none of the airline staff was overtly rude, the service experience was truly awful. To the untrained service operative or manager, the natural assumption is to think that this situation was a lose-lose for the airline and there is nothing they could have done to redeem the situation. Experts at customer service know this is emphatically untrue!

In fact, this is where training and empowerment of front-line service staff and managers really pays dividends. If the service staff had been alert to the dimensions of service exchange they would have pursued an enquiry with me to learn more about my deliverable, time and value dimensions. They would have learned that my trip was a vacation and that the reschedule was not a disaster. That my situation was providing them with valuable information; that all booking through agents must capture the customer (or passenger) contact details. And finally, for the cost of two taxi fares less than N\$1000 they could have delivered an excellent customer experience despite the inconvenience, rather than a customer service bomb.

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