FACTORS AFFECTING THE PROCESS OF CUSTOMER SERVICE

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Abstract

Customer service process consists of many elements, and it is influenced by many factors that impact directly on the end result. Professional customer service may become a guarantee of business success. A satisfied guest comes back to the company, and recommends it or not to the family, friends, and other potential customers, for example via Internet forums. The issue of customer service is a broad topic derived from such areas as human resources management and social communication. The aim of this paper is to identify key factors and management practices in the development of recreational possibilities. We methodically evaluate customers' needs, customer segmentation, decision-making processes and the quality of services.

Keywords: customer service, decision-making processes, the quality of services, management

Introduction

Customer service process consists of many elements. It is influenced by many factors that directly impact the end result. Professionalism is acquired from experience, however, the additional training conducted by the industry professionals is indispensable. Unfortunately, there is still a shortage of comprehensive publications dealing with the issue in question.

The topic can be particularly interesting to young people planning to open their first own business, as an exemplary staff becomes an advertisement in itself, leading to the achievement of measurable financial returns.

Customers' needs

The consumer decision making is primarily focused on satisfying one's needs.

Consumers also pay attention to the way the service is delivered. The staff's personal contact with a client has enormous influence on the consumer decision making process.

The consumer needs are the source of their behaviour and condition their purchases.

These primary needs are the starting point for the formation of another ones - the need to satisfy them often involves the desire of e.g. having money, adapting

to the behaviour of the group, impressing a particular person or attracting attention to oneself (Rudnicki, 1996).

Every customer has different needs that change over time together with their relevance (hierarchy of needs). Many of them, once satisfied, return e.g. after the particular product has been worn out or together with the changes in person's physiology.

However, it is necessary to remember that every consumer satisfies the needs in a different way, and the best service would be an individual approach to each of them.

That is why the next step in the service planning is determining to what market segment the offer is addressed.

Customer segmentation

The goals of each company usually include: the desire to reach out to the widest circle of customers, the desire to attract customers who live in the area and getting customers to return and use the services again. Therefore, Horovitz distinguished 3 types of customer segmentation according to: needs, type of service, loyalty (Horovitz, 2006).

It happens that different departments in a company use different types of segmentation. This is the right approach, the task of a marketing department, for instance, is to attract customers who express the demand for a particular product, the task of the customer service is to adjust the quality and manner of service to current customer needs - the amount of time they have, for whom they purchase the product, etc.

Segmentation can be performed in different ways. The most popular one is observation (Čieľ a kol., 2014).

The personnel must quickly get an idea in what situation the client currently is, who they are and what they want in order to be able to effectively adapt their service style, and thus gain the customer's satisfaction. Another method is auto-selection through the preparation of the place to make it easier for customers to use the services and access the company they are interested in (signs, pointers to different departments, different menus).

The reminders that are used and information sorting help in maintaining good relationships with customers. However, it is important to remember that they are still human beings, not just the numbers in the system.

Decision-making processes

Consumer behaviour is any decision-making process related to selecting products (goods and services) according to individual preferences, their resources and the act of buying itself (purchase) (Panasiuk, 2006). It is shaped by, inter alia,

the human psyche, everyday behaviour, the impact of social groups or the media influence.

That's why it can be qualified as a complex psychological process related to widely understood consumption that cannot be observed, however, can be predicted.

These processes can be divided into three basic stages (Styś, 2003):

- pre-purchase stage,
- buying and consumption stage,
- after-purchase stage

The pre-purchase stage includes such factors as:

- incentives - the elements that stimulate the client to produce the need to purchase some product located e.g. in the advertisements,
- awareness of the problem, that is, feeling the shortage of the product in question,
- source of information-gaining knowledge on how to resolve the defined problems,
- assessment of alternatives-a comparison of available solutions before making a choice.

What is also significant is a customer loyalty to proven providers. Customers often prefer to pay more to use the services of the proven providers. Another phenomenon favourable to entrepreneurs is a so called word-of-mouth marketing. The consumers are very often swayed by the opinion of their friends and relatives treating it as a reliable source of information. It usually facilitates the choice of the manufacturer and allows one to move to the next stages: consumption and after-purchase stage, when the customer decides whether they will use the services of the company again or not.

Consumer behaviour is closely related to customer expectations. These define the 4 types of services (Styś, 2003):

- Expected service-specific expectations and customer's perception of the service supplied to them.
- Desired service - the level of services that will ensure the client's delight.
- Appropriate service – minimum expectations in relation to the paid transaction, below which the service will not be accepted.
- Perceived service - the actual level of service quality that can be perceived by purchasers.

The level of quality of a product does not only consist of its physical features, timeliness of services and value to money relation (Larson, 2003). The client wishes to be important to the company and requires appropriate treatment. Therefore it is equally important to pay attention to the customer's problems so the erroneous and negative opinions about the company do not form while providing the service. If, however, such errors happen, they should immediately be fixed as

disregarding them may lead to not one but many unhappy, potential customers who have not even had contact with the company yet. Regular customers also participate in the process of creating quality and value of products as well as in developing the offer.

Therefore, it can be noticed that appropriate customer relationship management leads to differentiating the company from the competition, as well as to the promotion of the brand (Rogoziński, 2000). A customer can also be treated as a co-producer of the product itself.

The best possible customer service should be the employee's pleasure and make them proud of the well-performed job. However, the problem does not always lie in the service itself. Simple malaise or conflicts between colleagues are enough to make the quality of services deteriorate. Professionalism is therefore also separating the personal problems from the contacts with the customer.

There are, however, no precise rules, which could be presented to the employees. Therefore, the intuition and increased vigilance is required of them because each situation may be surprising, even to the most experienced employees.

The quality of services

Good contacts with customers are the basis for evaluation of the quality of services.

Each employee is responsible for the creation the company's image. It is important to remember that any opinion - which in this case becomes the definition of quality of service - is subjective and does not necessarily reflect the reality (Larson, 2003). However, no complaint can be ignored, they should rather be seen as guidelines for the further development of the company.

All activities carried out by the staff from the moment of the client's arrival to the office must be developed – welcome, providing of information, assistance in the selection of a product, accepting payments, etc.

Quality can be defined as a collection of properties of the services or products offered, which determines the degree of ability to meet specific needs (Kotler, 1994). Hence, the word quality does not define the standard of services, for this the additional adjectives such as "weak", "good", "sufficient" are needed.

In order to assess the service, one needs to start with preparing the evaluation criteria and their results, which can be considered satisfactory. The most commonly used criteria include (Parasuraman, Zeithaml, Berry, 1985):

- the availability of the services provided,
- dissemination of information about the product/service
- the skills and expertise of employees having direct contact with the customer,
- the company's reliability,
- responsibility for provided services,

- the condition, equipment and aesthetic impression of the building of the service provider,
- knowledge of the market.

However, these criteria are not perfect – the level of experience and opinions varies depending on the individual needs and customers' life situation. Therefore, what is also emphasised are the elements such as the degree of compliance with the customers wishes, timeliness, financial and material contribution of the client and the contractor, as well as the final customer experience (Kachniewska, 2002). Quality cannot be assessed by focusing on only one of the proposals. The individual criteria are only an indicator of what needs to be improved or changed in the process of providing services.

Around the year 1950, an American statistician – Edward Deming – formulated 14 indicators for raising the level of quality in a company through appropriate management and changing the corporate philosophy (Freeman, Gilbert, Stoner, 2001).

These indicators were the basis of developing views on a comprehensive quality management system (TQM- Total Quality Management). The term first appeared in the United States at the turn of the 70s and 80s of the 20th century. Deming paid attention primarily to the specific role of qualified managers and focusing their task on quality control, not solely the profits. Such an approach should implicate the change of the quantitative approach in favour of the quality in the process of production and services.

Quality control should involve proper development of a product or service from the very beginning, and not fixing what went wrong so far. The next indicator is concerned with reducing the sensitivity to price of component products or subcontractors.

A cheap product of poor quality will not achieve the expected effects when finalizing the order. These indicators also take into account the dynamics of the market and the continuous economic changes as well as changing customer preferences (Čief, Tomčíková, 2013).

This will eliminate the uncertainty in the employee decision making process and actions on behalf of the company. Employees should also be encouraged to maintain healthy relationships with other colleagues and to promote mutual assistance instead of the propaganda allegedly designed to motivate subordinates to achieve better effects.

Quality control is also associated with the prediction and control of the processes in the company (Čief, Tomčíková, 2013). Therefore, to fully resolve the problems that may arise during the production or the provision of services, specific methods called TQM tools are used.

In addition to statistical quality control, one can use the method developed by the Japanese management theorist, Kaoru Ishikawa called the fishbone diagram (Best, Neuhauser, Kaoru, 2008).

It involves identifying sources of problems (for example, machine or man) that may appear in the company, specifying the reason (breakdowns, lack of adequate training) that can lead to failure, to finally be able to describe the effects of the incorrect proceedings. To increase the efficiency, some companies also use the so-called *benchmarking*.

It is a way of improving the quality of products and services of the company, which is based on the comparison and executing the ideas and results of the best companies in the world.

TQM system is one of the most useful concepts of modern management. In order for the system to constitute an integrated method of management, it should contain some essential elements.

They include the following categories (Knowles, 2001):

- employee reward systems,
- professional development and training programmes,
- communication skills,
- striving for professional attitude,
- establishing procedures and methods.

Every company should have its own method of rewarding employees for the proper results and sales achievements. Often, however, these awards are only financial bonuses, usually too low to motivate staff to make effort again and be involved in the development of the company. The prize must be adequate to the work of an employee and not to the final, tangible result. That's why the executives who do not want to jeopardise the company's budget should focus on the implementation of other, more effective motivators, also the intangible ones. One of the incentives can be sponsoring an industry training that will benefit both sides – the employee will feel essential to a company that acknowledged their efforts, and the company will obtain a better qualified employee.

To ensure the functionality and effective processes in the company, focus should be given to their meticulous description.

In order for them to be described and implemented correctly, the company should make an effort to obtain the ISO 9000 series certificate (Knowles, 2001). This certificate is also a benchmark for consumers ensuring the the company whose services they use pays exceptional attention to the quality standards of their services. Companies that decide to implement these standards are controlled both internally and externally, and the diplomas obtained by them are a guarantee of satisfaction of potential customers.

ISO (*International Standard Organisation*) is an international organization of national associations and standards organizations which oversees all standards for products (initially) and now also for services (Górska-Warsewicz, Sawicka, 2012). All standards of the 9000 series are concerned with the quality management. The awarded certificate is valid for 3 years, after that time a company needs to renew it in order to prove the standard of service that is recognized in every corner

of the world. During those 3 years, the entrepreneur trying to get the certificate has to expect the number of control checks carried out to ensure that implemented norms are still enforced.

Currently valid ISO standard for hotel companies is ISO 9001: 2008, which includes a whole range of quality requirements (http://www.iso.org/iso/home/standards/management-standards/iso_9000.htm/). At the beginning, the preliminary audit is carried out in a company. After establishing further actions, the implementing company sets a range of trainings both for employees as well as for the management and other organization executives. Then, in accordance with the requirements, all sorts of information is gathered, the objectives and strategies of the company are set and, based on that, the full and final documentation on the actual situation of the company with the view to fulfilling these conditions is created. Only after final acceptance of the auditor, the company can apply for an opinion and awarding of the desired certificate by the International Organization for Standardization (<http://www.iso.org.pl/iso-9001/>). Some of the benefits the company can reap thanks to the implementation of ISO standards is primarily improving the company's and thus increasing its competitiveness on the market, raising the effectiveness of every organizational cells, as well as unifying the standards of services provided to clients.

This fact implies the proposal to introduce to a company a tool called CRM (Customer Relationship Management).

This is the method and strategy group supporting a company management including identifying, attracting and continuous communication as well as maintaining, the most positive and close relationship with the client as possible (Sołtysik-Piorunkiewicz, 2008). The first CRM systems have sprung up in the 1980s and focused mainly on combination of a calendar tool with non-complex databases. Soon after, new telecommunication solutions, the development of information technology and, above all, Internet penetration brought about the evolution of simple applications to complex management and sales systems. These systems should include a history of contact with the client and services provided for them, as well as the problems that have arisen in the past during use of the product in question. The personnel that has access to this information should be properly selected and trained to seem professional and to be able, without the trouble, to define the customer's wishes. Nowadays, the implementation of CRM systems becomes an effective way to gain the advantage over the competition.

Customer satisfaction is, however, a thing completely subjective, and their opinion might as well depend on their current well-being.

In this way, the quality assessment methods were created which exclude subjective opinions and clients participating in creating it.

One of them is the analysis of duration. It is used to observe the number of clients served, time of the office equipment use, time for private matters (coffee, checking personal mail). It optimizes the work process and supports the

involvement of employees within the specified time of their shift. The observer does not always have to be a specialist in the field. The anonymous researchers known as the *Mystery Shoppers* are used complementary in the service quality assessment. Such a person buys a product, and then reports on any shortcomings noticed.

This study serves to identify the current effectiveness of the service. But for more advanced research, many more models were developed. The most interesting ones include: SERVQUAL and CIT.

A method for measuring quality of service called SERVQUAL was designed in 1985 by an American professor, a specialist in the field of marketing and service quality A. Parasuraman (Głowacka, 2000). The model aims to study the phenomenon of quality which is extremely difficult to measure. It is applicable in many types of services, including tourism. In addition, it helps to determine the importance of each aspect of service for specific groups of customers. The test using SERVQUAL method begins with determining the criteria for the evaluation and designating a scale. Depending on the type of company and services provided there, these criteria will have a different meaning for the customers tested.

A technique complementary to the previously proposed ways of measuring the quality of service is the analysis of critical incidents, *Critical Incident Technique* (CIT). It involves collecting interviews, praises, complaints and general customer feedback, who in a special way remembered some experience - whether positive or negative (Kachniewska, 2002).

Customers often cannot pinpoint exactly one reason why the service was evaluated as correct or not. Therefore, another way to describe inconvenience, particularly for the client, is *the trade-off* or *conjoint analysis* (Horovitz, 2006). They focus on finding the optimum combination of the various elements of the service, which will be the most closely related to the needs of customers. This can be done through, for example, the analysis of customers' complaints. This is done primarily via qualitative interviews which can include customer satisfaction surveys, analysis of individual complaints and discussion groups, the so-called focus groups. These methods are not methods of quantitative evaluation, the results cannot be presented in the form numbers and scales, but they are the richest source of information on the processes taking place in the company and the company's image on the market.

Human resources management

For many customers, what is more important from the service itself is the person who provides it. Employees, with their personality and people skills, can attract all sorts of buyers who are ultimately loyal to one company regardless of price fluctuations and changes in the rules (for example a gym trainer, a massage

therapist in SPA, a waiter in a restaurant). Therefore, properly selected staff is particularly important in tourist enterprises.

The staff of any company providing services can be grouped into three categories (Styś, 2003):

- first-line employees (who have direct contact with customers),
- support staff (e.g. people working on particular floors in a hotel),
- executives.

The first group includes already mentioned representatives of the company.

They are the direct cause of customer satisfaction or complaints. Those workers are also the most vulnerable to stress associated with customer accusations that are not their fault, but are caused by small omissions or simply the individual mood and the guest's well being. These are often influenced by support workers activities who, not being in direct contact with the customer, do not feel the pressure of raising standards of the tasks performed so strongly. Therefore, to properly motivate both staff levels, a company needs an experienced leader.

There are three main levels of management: top level / administrative level, middle level, low level / first-line managers. And despite appearances, even the lower level is of the utmost importance, since direct management involves close relationships with first-line employees - the ones responsible for direct contact with the client. According to the Larson's definition, direct management is close cooperation between a company's management bodies and its staff which aims to create an unusual business offer meeting the most demanding customers expectations (Larson, 2003). Therefore, this is a way of managing that does not elevate the management. The basis of this method is to create an atmosphere of contentment among subordinates and their superiors, which will increase the involvement of entire personnel in the customer service process.

Conclusion

The customer requirements on today's market grow every year. Entrepreneurs of a particular industry should be fully aware of the need for employee training in the field of professional customer service, since this is the only way they can obtain valuable staff, who will turn out to be the key to the business's success. Proper customer service is not only the principles of employee attitude toward the customers, but also appropriate human resources management. In the paper, we evaluate customer requirements in recreational settings. In detail, we focused on the need for efficient management of human resources quality. Employees who understand one another are a proof of the company's reliability and a guarantee of quick solution to the customers' problems. In addition, team work gives a sense of belonging, and so meets one of the basic needs of every human being.

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