

Quality in customer attendance at an educational services company

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Abstract

The present study constitutes a study on the crucial success factors which are implicit in quality attendance planning, the basis of which is a case study at a company from the educational services sector. The research methodology is based on authoritative literature and field research. Conclusions are reached as for the significance of keeping in touch with customers, aligning the company actions to the needs and expectations of both the outside customers and those in charge of attendance.

Key words: quality in services, educational services management, customer satisfaction.

1. Introduction

In the modern-day high competitiveness scenario, companies cannot ignore the benefits quality in service supply can add to their final product. Opposite to technological input items, which in no time turn into commodities, services become an important source of competitive gain. The differentiation brought about by means of quality services, intrinsically constituted by attendance quality, is focused on hard to copy quality dimensions (GARVIN, David A.; 1992). Companies sell not only (tangible) products but also services (of an intangible nature), and, therefore, they should worry about the quality of both. A supplier-customer relationship is prone to failure if the delivered product goes hand in hand with poor attendance. This means the attendance system plays an important role in the perception of the product's quality (GELDERS, L.; MANNAERTS, P.; MAES, 1994).

The eventual lack of concern about material and human resources and a suitable attendance structure will definitely drive the customer away to a competitor. Besides, a company which gives priority to keeping in touch with the customer should understand that quality must be acquired by taking into account the customer's point of view, and that, while providing service, generally subjective characteristics are to be highlighted, as opposed to products (goods), whose characteristics are generally objective. Since the customer is inclined to pay for what he or she values, revenue generation strategies should be created through the product, as well as profit increase by keeping the customer by means of a differentiated service supply linked to that product (GRYNA, Frank M.; 1977).

As each and every company can count on accessing the same kind of technology, human care is that which actually adds value to the business. A company should be able to recognize that opportunity lies in attendance performed by motivated and qualified people. An organization that does not focus on the customer and does not count on its staff or inside customers' efficiency and commitment does not create a positive link to its image, missing an essential element when it comes to its competitiveness (GIANESI, Irineu F. N.; CORREA, Henrique Luiz; 1996).

1.1 Objective

From what has been exposed above, this text aims at studying the quality planning of attendance services, here specifically educational services. The study will focus on the quality of attendance services, that is, on personal contact over the telephone or other resources and technologies.

1.2 Research strategy

We will be presenting a case study held in an organization whose mission is to supply educational services. This choice is motivated by the need of taking better advantage of the strong point identified in the work market: the demand for professional updating, awareness of the value of continued education, and investment in employability through differentiation by knowledge. The method is mostly qualitative and takes into consideration the researcher's participation, for the researcher directly acts on the process under study. The conclusions presented here are based on a semistructured interview and the researchers' observation.

1.3 Questions

To clarify the problem under study, the following questions should be answered:

- Does the company recognize how important an efficient attendance system is for a successful product sale?
- Is there a quality planning methodology under use for inside and outside attendance? Who is defining quality? The company or the customer?
- Does the company use information by the customers to fulfill their needs and expectations?
- Is the company able to identify losses as a consequence of poor attendance?

2. Case study

The organization under research is financed partly by taxes paid by the Brazilian companies, and has been endeavoring to move to its financial maintenance through services supplied to commercial organizations, particularly in the educational area. It is a domestic institution, whose case study was conducted in a poor region of the Rio de Janeiro State. The institution under study carries an attendance structure considering the following kinds of outside customers: public companies, private companies, and retail consumers. Thus, in order to fulfill these customers' needs and expectations, services are classified into two features:

- First layer service: exclusively, attendance service at the time of subscription;
- Second layer service: provided while generating and spreading knowledge during learning meetings in courses, trainings, and lectures.

For the services identified according to the above features, there will be supply agents also classified into different aspects. The service suppliers can be first considered to be in charge of the attendance service included in the first layer. The attendance service is the initial stage of the process, being fundamental for the second layer service to happen.

The company is seen as a second layer service supplier, holding the function of providing the main product, as well as in the relationship with the inside customer (attendant), recognizing that the service supplied by the attendant will directly depend on the conditions offered by the company.

Considered as first layer customers, or outside customers, in this case study, are those individuals who come to the reception in order to find out about or subscribe to courses, trainings, and lectures held *in loco*, whereas corporations, and market, among others, are excluded from this customer account. Considered as second layer customers, or inside customers, are those in charge of outside attendance, that is, the front line people. From the relationship between suppliers and customers, in an exchange of gain between the parties, the fulfillment of needs and expectations stands as a quality parameter, and failures in this relationship are taken as gaps, resulting in the discrepancy as regards the expected service and how the received service was perceived.

2.1 Proposal for a quality planning methodology in attendance

After the whole management process was assessed, a need was identified to create mechanisms aiming at the customers' satisfaction for the sake of improved results. The customer's satisfaction and loyalty began to be regarded as business objectives, thus keeping a follow up on the parties involved in this process and promoting pro-active and corrective actions to perfect the system.

The methodology aims at fitting opportunities for the company to approach the customer, proposing a conception change from “student attendance” to “customer attendance”, and transforming the sector into a sales outlet worried about the same kind of things any prosperous and efficient company worries about while managing its contacts with customers – that means it is a priority to fit the attendance to the quality process, in search for excellence in attendance as a competitive differential added to its offered products.

Needs and expectations will be identified through qualitative exploratory studies conducted among executives, and outside and inside customers. Interviews will serve as a basis for formulating the Proposal for Quality Planning Methodology.

2.2 The attendance cycle

While services are being provided, the customer experiences a series of events and several “tell the truth moments”. This series is known as “service cycle”. When well dealt with, it produces several opportunities of making positive impacts on the relationship.

Considering that a potential customer would like to take a course, from the first contact with some information source about the company (ex.: an ad) to the moment subscription is made, the customer experiences a cycle of services, providing the supplier with several opportunities of service supply with the quality parameters; these instances allow the customer to realize how qualified the offered service is. Next the occurrence of these “tell the truth moments” (TTM) can be observed:

TTM1: The first TTM is powerful enough to bring the customer to the company, which means getting in touch with a stimulating source of fulfillment of one or several personal needs. It is when the customer gets in touch with the product and/ or service through publicity, either via media, previous experience or word of mouth. This is the magic moment when expectation builds up and generates the opportunity that brings the customer to the service.

TTM2: The second moment, the telephone contact, when well explored, can culminate in the customer's presence. Here, efficiency can guarantee the customer's satisfaction, and the result can be translated into closing a deal. That is why the service provided by the attendant is so important, for, no matter how good the offered product is, the way he or she acts is fundamental for the formation of image and expectation.

TTM3: That is when the customer wants to know better what he or she would like to acquire. Here again the attendant's attitude is influential in generating image and expectation: self-assurance, voice, language, and knowledge of the service/ product could strengthen or nullify a previous communication.

TTM4: When the contact is about to end is the last chance to turn the customer's expectation into result. That is when the effects from previous moments should be sensed and a quick assessment should be made – this works as a way to manage needs, expectations, and perceptions for the sake of driving the customer into evaluating the cycles experienced so far. Thus necessary improvements can be put into practice in order to ensure the contact efficiency and an immediate closing of a deal.

TTM5: Now the customer is present and a new evaluation process ensues. For this stage one should be very well prepared, trying to link it to the previous events, which brought about the customer's presence. Now several opportunities are provided that do not depend only on the attendant's efficiency, but on the whole system as well, including material resources, environment, atmosphere, among other attributes which will serve as a basis for the customer's analysis.

TTM6: It offers opportunities for the customer's satisfaction regarding the generated expectations, determining the consumption result or driving the customer away to a competitor. Now the customer compares previous information to what he or she actually found.

TTM7: It has to do with efficiently managing all the previous moments, by translating the result from the endeavor and the service consolidation at the reception into a closed deal. At this point, the customer will evaluate all the events he or she experienced, comparing what was expected to what was really received. The customer will get out of the company having formed a conception, not only about the product but also about the attendance sector's efficiency, thus building up a global image of the company.

According to the image a customer develops of a service or product supplier, the organization in question will be benefitted or not. The formative character of the expectation is connected to the customer and is determined by his or her social, cultural, personal, and psychological characteristics. This, along with the inside and/ or outside communication, forms the organization's image.

The expectation can be positive provided the contact with the image has generated satisfactory results, bringing forth favorable perceptions along with conditions to reinforce the existing image. When the customer was not in touch with expectation-forming sources and has no definition of what he or she expects from the service or product supplier, his or her expectation is neuter, bringing forth favorable perceptions along with the existing conditions for image formation.

When the profile and the contact with the expectation-forming sources were not favorable for the image formation and the expectations are negative, managing it is more complex. One has to work on the expectations and revert them into positive image.

2.3 Stages of attendance planning

The crucial point in planning quality starts from the knowledge process, when the company is supposed to turn outside and inside, checking both its internal and external environment, trying to become familiar with its structure, sector, system, inside and outside customer, identifying the quality attributes in its attendance service, and structuring a system capable of fulfilling and even surpassing the customers' expectations.

The researches with outside and inside customers enable the segmentation of customer groups and the identification of expectations, providing a basis for defining quality dimensions, as per the stages below:

1st Get to know the (outside and inside) customer, their profile, identifying their needs, expectations, and interferences, through researches with potential and actual customers, determining quality dimension and its attributes.

2nd Evaluate the perception level of these needs and expectations on the part of the service suppliers, identifying gaps between quality from the customer's point of view and from the service supplier's point of view. The evaluation should be made in relation to the second layer service supplier (company), and the first layer customer (outside customer); in relation to the first layer service supplier (attendant) and the first layer customer (outside customer); and in relation to the second layer service provider (company) and the second layer customer (inside

customer).

3rd Determine poor quality costs as per gap analysis.

4th Propose improvement actions for the sake of a higher degree of adherence to quality dimensions.

5th By means of researches with customers, get to know the degree of satisfaction from services provided at the attendance office, evaluate the perception level in relation to their expectations; in other words, identify the gaps between the customers' perceptions and expectations in three stages: second layer service supplier (company) and first layer customer (outside customer); first layer service supplier (attendant) and first layer customer (outside customer); second layer service supplier (company) and second layer customer (inside customer).

First stage: critical analysis of the environment

The methodology's first stage consists of the analysis of records available at the company, and, through interviews with managers, to recognize the opportunities offered by the attendance system and the importance of the parties making up this system.

Second stage: attributes and quality dimensions in the customers' view

The methodology's second stage consists of the knowledge of outside and inside factors contributing to quality planning, by means of interviews with outside and inside customers, in an attempt to identify parameters for fulfilling needs and expectations, segmenting the action market by defining the clientele's profile and determining factors contributing to the formation of needs and expectations through the customer's voice aligned to the process and the quality determined in order to meet requisites.

Through researches with potential and/ or actual customers and inside customers, the company will be able to set actions to favor image and consequently an improved contact management, by designing an efficient customer care model.

Third stage: attributes and quality dimensions as per suppliers' view, and identifying quality gaps

In comparing the customers' expectations to the service supplier's perception, flaws or differences are identified between what the customer wants and what the supplier thinks the customer needs. This difference is translated into gaps, which, if not taken as flaws in the system, bring about dissatisfactions. The gaps will be identified through researches with the managers and customer attendants. By means of the research with managers and inside customers, a list is generated of quality attributes in attendance from the service supplier's point of view. The questionnaire should be similar to the one applied to inside and outside customers; questions will be very much alike, such as: what are the customers' expectations as for the attendance place?

After getting to know about the needs and expectations and determining the quality attributes as per the customer's view, one evaluates how much the service supplier is perceiving the importance of these attributes for the customer's satisfaction, comparing the service designed by the supplier and the service designed by the customer. From this comparison, gaps are identified: Gap 1, the one existing between the customer's parameters and the suppliers' parameters. Gap 2, that between the quality parameters determined by the suppliers and the projected service. Gap 3, that between the service projected by the supplier and the one actually performed. Gap 4, between the service projected (expected) by the customer and the received (perceived) service.

Fourth stage: defining poor quality costs

To measure is important for quality management, the most important being to measure and evaluate flaw possibilities before they actually take place. Costs with recovering customers are far higher due to the multiplying effect from a dissatisfied customer's negative propaganda.

Exemplifying from the case study, inside flaw costs with rotation of personnel specialized in attendance, the task requires, among other things, relationship competences with customers and technical knowledge of the product; rotation generates costs, such as those with recruitment and selection, and others which are not always identified. Examples of inside flaws are attendance systems carrying flaws whose causes are being diagnosed, and the reorganization of the process and procedures after the flaw is detected. It is even more costly to recover the customer.

Costs from any activity aiming at dealing with mistakes that took place and were noticed after the services were supplied, causing the customer to leave the organization, are called outside flaw costs. Complaints by dissatisfied customers who realized a communication flaw took place while they were being taken care of and who realized the due date was badly projected, cause the company to have not only the cost of reissuing an invoice but also the cost of the complaint management and the endeavor to make sure the customer does not carry a negative image of the service supplier, thus multiplying the effect among potential customers. Avoiding the occurrence of mistakes would be more advisable, of course, but in order to prevent them one must be aware of a likely flaw occurrence. Ideally, that should not be with poor quality experiences.

Fifth stage: the quality project in attendance service

The quality project in customer attendance aims at reaching higher and higher quality levels in service providing from the consumer's point of view, with alignment through the service suppliers' perceptions. Actions reflect the alignment of needs and expectations with the suppliers' perception. The service project will be monitored as for the customer's perception during consumption, and evaluation will be carried out through satisfaction surveys on customers in the methodology's sixth stage. It is important to signal that the project has originated from a list of attributes highlighted by means of the researches with inside and outside customers; therefore, this list should be constantly updated, for some attributes, according to the clientele's diversity, may vary determining new dimensions.

Sixth stage: evaluation and maintenance of the customer attendance system

The performance evaluation of the customer attendance process enables one to follow up on the system performance, making it possible to control and make decisions so as for an inside and outside customer satisfaction standard to be maintained, providing all involved with achieved goals.

The attendance process evaluation consists of assessing the customers' perception degree as regards the quality dimensions in a continuum, mainly because of the great attribute variability a service may have. The evaluation, which is a result of the customer satisfaction survey, will show the result between the customer's perception and the degree of success service suppliers reached while meeting customers' needs and expectations. The quality process evaluation in attendance and the identification of gaps followed by suitable improvement actions will determine the satisfaction level the company is prepared to offer while providing attendance to different customer groups.

By comparing the customer satisfaction research results, we can evaluate the service quality and its contribution for profitability and customer management excellence. If the perceived service quality is equal to the expected service quality, the result will be 1 (one), meaning the customer's satisfaction index while trying to meet his or her expectations. If the perceived service quality is higher than the expected service quality, it means the customer's satisfaction

was excelled; a lower quality level points to the customer's dissatisfaction as regards his or her expectations.

If the company defines a strategy focused on people's satisfaction – inside and outside customers – it is important to identify, while the system evaluation process is going on, improvement factors and positive results, giving value to front line personnel's contribution in achieving system efficiency and success, and establishing recognition and reward criteria. As for the outside customer, customer management programs, such as bonuses, should be developed, aiming at successive consumption of the organization's services.

To conclude, concerning the relation between the methodology stages, the gaps are as follows: Gap 1, the one existing between the quality parameters attributed by the customers and the suppliers' perception. Gap 2, that between the quality parameters determined by the suppliers and the project. Gap 3, between the quality improvement project and the actual service provided. Gap 4, between the service expected by the customer and the perceived service.

3 Conclusions and proposals for new studies

The study consolidates the relation between marketing and operations, since marketing is directly connected to expectation formation and communication with customers.

The importance given to attendance is based on the organization's nature, for attendance is the “entrance door” for the client to the educational services supply system.

Analyzing the contact degree between attendants and customers in the operations, one realizes how flexible the processes are, which means a higher uncertainty variability and difficulty to control these uncertainties. The emphasis on having people supply services, rather than a self-service system, requires a high level of autonomy to front line people, offering a wider range of solutions.

It is worth noting that it is extremely important for the company to define the “tell the truth” moments in a service cycle, with clear definitions by the agents, suppliers and customers, so that the methodology may achieve the proposed objectives.

Generally, companies focusing their attention on attendance quality begin the process by satisfaction evaluation, investing in systems they consider efficient for meeting requirements, on the basis of a quality suggested by the company, and only after they evaluate the result. When evaluating customer satisfaction, companies try to check the customer's perception level in relation to the supplied service, after which they compare quality from the supplier's point of view and the customer's perception.

The proposal presented here aims at highlighting quality attributes, carrying out a study of how expectations are formed and an evaluation of how the service suppliers are perceiving the way these needs and expectations are being met. This is done by comparing the customer's quality vision and that of the suppliers, identifying flaws within customer-supplier communication, analyzing gaps, which are variations hampering a satisfactory relationship in the service chain, and recognizing costs for a proposal of improved actions to correct the process.

The performance evaluation of the attendance system should be made by evaluating the customer's satisfaction level. The research should be produced on the basis of the attribute list, depending, therefore, on the initial construction of parameters or evaluation scales.

The methodology proposal presented herein is based on a specific company's structure and operation, so it should be adjusted to companies willing to apply the methodology. In the same way, specific research forms should be developed for each company. New studies should be conducted to complement the present research, since a study on the life quality of

people directly acting in attendance to the public is fundamentally significant.

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