

CUSTOMER SERVICE PERSONNEL'S PERCEPTIONS OF CUSTOMERS: THE CASE OF A TELECOMMUNICATIONS FIRM

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ABSTRACT

This paper sets out to extend current knowledge on perception of customer service personnel (CSP) towards customers. It examines these perceptions by employing the CAB Paradigm, utilizing an interview followed by questionnaires based on the interview findings for CSPs in a telecommunications firm in Malaysia. Data collected from the interview was analyzed using frequency distribution and data from the questionnaire was analyzed using factor analysis. Findings indicated the most identified variable was "Interested" and the least was "Gross/Unpleasant". Factor analysis indicated 9 views of customers termed as Mr. Hot, Mr. Mix Up, Mr. Pushy, Mr. Slow, Mr. Serious, Mr. Professional, Mr. Simple and Mr. Cheerful. The number of respondents and the subsequent weak KMO limit the study. Nevertheless, it provides a basis for the CAB Paradigm to explain why customer service in Sarawak is weak. The implications of the study to management and HRM department are strong as they indicate that CSP's views of customers are negative, and such personnel thus require further training and supervision on how to treat customers. It is rare to find articles that look at CSP's view of customers, as the literature is chock-a-block with the views of customers. This study allows for a preview into the mind of CSPs.

Keywords: Customer service personnel; Customer; Perception; Telecommunication; Malaysia.

I. INTRODUCTION

Customers are seen as demanding, with a variety of expectations and needs that are to be met by organizations (Woodruffe, 1995). They have different types of attitudes, characters and behaviours (Payne, 1999). It is neither possible to change or influence customers nor to fulfill all their expectations and needs. These factors are beyond management's control. It would be easier for management to improve quality service by effectively managing customer service personnel (CSP) rather than managing customers (Heskett et al., 1990).

Nevertheless, the literature is focused on customers' perception towards sales persons; addressing various issues such as the nature of consumer expectations, relationship quality, as well as customer satisfaction and loyalty (Bebko, 2000; Holmlund & Strandvik, 1999; McDougall & Levesque, 2000). Research on CSP's perceptions of customers is limited yet essential because both parties are actively interacting (Bitner et al., 1994; Holmlund & Strandvik, 1999). Studies have noted that this interaction will affect the perceived quality of the service delivered (Woodruffe, 1995). Furthermore, CSPs are the ones who have to deal with the emotional expression of customers (Lemmink & Mattsson, 2002). Thus, it is essential for the organization to be aware of how CSPs perceive customers, as it will then affect the way they feel about and treat customers.

It is obvious that what an organization espouses may not be what the CSPs believe. Organizations state that they treat customers as kings and claim that the customer is always right (DeVrye, 1994). Nevertheless, CSPs are emotional entities who have to deal with customers' emotions yet management has been shown to ignore CSPs (Lemmink & Mattsson, 2002; Schneider & Bowen, 1995; Shapiro et al., 1992). Thus, CSPs differentiate

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