Enhancing Service Desks' Customers Relationship Management in a South African Contact and e-Service Organizations

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Abstract—The service desk is a critical part of customer relationship management in any service organization as it is the first point of contact with customers, thereby holding the key to organizations' profitability due to the value accruable to an organization from impressed and satisfied customers. Such customers may sometimes only have one opportunity to form an impression of the services obtainable from the organization. It is desirable if such impression meets or even exceeds the customers' expectation. This study presents a critical analysis of service desks in a South African contact and e-service environment. An interpretive qualitative approach was used. The theoretical perspectives on service quality, expectation and its management as well as previous efforts towards improving customer support are reviewed. Problems experienced by customers and businesses with regard to service desks are identified and a solution framework is developed.

Index Terms—Service desks, service quality, customer relationship management, call center management, helpdesks, expectation management in businesses and organizations

I. INTRODUCTION AND BACKGROUND

IN customer relationship management, service desks involve the use of proper technology by organizations to present a contact point for services being rendered to clients. Offering a careful attention to their clients or customers is an important strategy used by companies to try and obtain an advantage over their competitors [9].

According to [14], ways of achieving this include innovative products and services, operational excellence and intimate customer relationships. It should be noted that it is not until recently that organizations are beginning to take intimate customer relationships very serious. Apart from various other reasons, one particular reason is that most individuals like to feel important and it seems natural for customers to continue to patronize organizations that treat them intimately and importantly. This however should not be at the expense of quality service and support. The availability of many competitive services makes it easy for customers to seek better services elsewhere if they sense a lack of quality service and support. But furthermore, in this digital economy where users directly access e-services such as e-commerce, online banking, etc, the growth of e-services continues. So is the need for "service desks"

increasing in order to assist both contact and e-customers. This has led to dramatic increase and use of "service desks" and "call centers". However, Boddy (2000) in Corea (2006) notes that service desks and call centers have had limited attention in recent IS research despite their wide, dramatic rates of adoption. This study is an attempt to contribute to research in this emerging aspect of IT-based systems in organizations.

A. The problem description

The South African business environment is not left out in the quest for improved services through the use of call centers and help desks in both "contact service" organizations and "electronic service" organizations. A motivation for this study stemmed for the author's encounter with service in both type of organizations. The Revenue Service organization in recent years introduced the e-filing system for submitting tax returns electronically replacing the previous manual system. Also instituted is a "help-desk" system that can assist users on the e-filing system.

After having submitted previous tax return successfully, the author was confident that e-filing submission for the recent tax year can easily be done without any hitch and so left the submission till the due date. On logging onto the e-filing system to submit the tax return, the author somehow decided to quickly fill in the section for entering the car details and kilometers traveled for *travel allowance* before filling in the income section. But then, the fields for entering the car details and kilometers traveled were inactive and did not allow entries.

Having the "peace of mind" that the helpdesk is there for assistance, the author picked the phoned the helpdesk which was continuously giving "engaged tone". After trying several times, the author decided to send an email to the helpdesk. While expecting prompt reply, none was forthcoming. The author therefore decided to complete whatever area of the e-form that can be completed, and then correct it at a later date. It was then that the author realized that the travel section became active after the income sections were completed. So, the returns were eventually "filed" that day.

Eventually, the reply from the e-filing help desk came twenty five days later than expected. They could not identify the reason for the problem as the data has now been entered.

The other encounter emanated from a poster by a South African Airways (SAA) staff which indicates that "users

should not turn their lack of planning into emergency" on the part of the service provider. On the other hand, clients are likely to be looking unto the service provider to solve their problems irrespective of the cause. These contexts bring to light the difference between users' expectation and users experience on a service. The research question then is: How can we enhance the performance of service desks in the South African business environment towards improvement?

B. The research approach, design and methodology

Towards attempting to find possible answers to unanswered questions, or to find better answers to incompletely answered questions, [10,3] notes that academic researchers are in the business of explaining the unexplained, coming up with theories to make sense of the world around us and with solutions to practical problems. The overall research approach is an interpretive research involving a qualitative research design. Interpretivism focuses on the development of sound explanations and understandings of research phenomenon of interest [16]. It is further explained by [19] that interpretivism emphasizes context and singular occurrences in the hope of extracting meaning and making sense using qualitative methods by leaning on phenomenology (a first-hand description of human experience).

The research orientation of this topic assumes that the reality for different situations could differ. But by and large, this study provides detail context that could enable understanding and the application of this study in other contexts. The research methods involve elements of detailed literature study. In addition, a brief investigation is conducted in the form of a case study of SAA using interviewing as the major tool to obtain information. These are presented using thick descriptions that are less structured and more responsive to the need for understanding and actualizing effective service desk in the South African business environment towards competitive advantage, customers' satisfaction and profitability.

C. Outline of the rest of the paper

With the background, research problem and approach given in section I, section II presents the literature review detailing the theoretical perspectives on quality service, expectation and its management as well as previous efforts towards improving customer support. Section III discusses the problems experienced by users and businesses with regards to service desks. Section IV presents the proposed recommendations while section V concludes the study.

II. LITERATURE REVIEW

A. Theoretical perspective on quality service

As noted in the introduction, the availability of many competitive services makes it easy for customers to seek better services elsewhere if they sense lack of quality service and support. Therefore, various research studies have been conducted on quality services in organizations. It is noted in [2] that while one of the primary reasons why organizations are investing in Information Systems (IS) is

the improvement of the quality of services (which is an important output of IS), it is noteworthy that improvement in IS has a positive correlation to the quality of service. Aside from this direct impact, it is also noted that quality IS will lead to quality information which is of strategic importance in running organizations. Moreover, the ease with which the system can be used by customer service representative helps the representative to give quality service by servicing customer better with the possibility of enhancing profit.

Another key dimension of service interaction quality is the service providers' positive attitude and demeanor as positive displays and friendliness enhance overall service quality [8]. Yet, service organizations spend little effort and resources on planning for service quality leading to a "cycle of service failures" and subsequently lower profitability [20]. Serious minded and forward looking organizations obviously need to avoid failures and lower profitability by taking service quality very serious. Heskett [11] demonstrates such seriousness about quality service by stating that high quality support services and policies that enable employees to deliver results to customers, lead to satisfied, loyal and productive employees; employee satisfaction creates value in services provided to customers; value leads to customer satisfaction; customer satisfaction leads to loyalty; and loyalty by customers stimulates growth and profit in the organization. It therefore becomes critical to understand every step of the way that could lead to customers' satisfaction. This in essence implies understanding what the customers expect and how to manage and meet those customers' expectation. This is addressed in the next section.

B. Customers' expectation and its management

Expectation is described by [6] as "what customers predict about the occurrence of the service (will happen) and what customers belief about the capability of the provider (should happen)", or in more detail:

> "a belief about a future event that is based on information gathered directly by the customer through personal observation, indirectly through attention to information provided by others, or is inferred based on information or observation of some related occurrence" [6].

It is very costly to obtain new customers and that the profitability of a loyal customer grows with the time of the relationship [4]. Therefore it is important to continually manage the customer's expectation to cultivate longstanding loyalty and retention as a key to profitability.

Towards a discussion on how customer's expectation should be managed, the "gap" model of service quality [6] as proposed by Zeithaml et al, focus on the difference between the creation of expectation and the ability of the delivery system to meet those expectations. This emphasizes the existence of a number of interfaces in the overall service delivery process wherein the degree of congruence between facets will affect the final outcome. Using the example of "the relationship between descriptions in promotional materials and the actual capability of the delivery system" [6] establishes the existence of expectation as the customer enters the delivery system, and the cues which may

influence his/her assessment of the ongoing process of service. Coye [6] therefore concludes that it is incumbent on managers of service operations to be aware of the factors that influence both customers' desires and customers' expectations and the potential opportunities for interventions that could lead to more effective management of these relationships.

Such interventions should be at critical points aimed at reducing the potential gap between customers' expectations and perceived service delivery. Therefore, as management creates desire and expectations on the part of customer for their service, they must also ensure that customer has clear expectation about what the organization can actually deliver [6]. Generally, interventions would be aimed at raising, lowering or making salient the initial expectation.

Interventions may therefore include disclaimer statements, clarifications, explanations, or even denial as well as transparency such as sometimes encouraging customers to increase his/her level of participation. Coye [6] highlights the importance of communication and inter-personal skills in managing expectation.

C. Previous efforts towards improving customer support

Heras [9] describes the use of Case-Based Reasoning (CBR) systems in Technology Management Systems (TMS) to control and improve processes involved in the provision of technological and customer support services. The CBR is aimed at storing and later reusing the solution applied to specific problems and the information about the problem-solving process towards improving the service or customer support offered. The ultimate goal is to shorten the solving time as "a quick and accurate response to the customers' problems ensures their satisfaction and a good reputation for the company" [9], which therefore can increase profits.

Ngai, Xiu and Chau [15] stress the importance of data mining techniques to customer relationship management (CRM) systems. This is important because many organizations already have stored a wealth of data about their current and potential customers, suppliers and business partners. Analyzing such database to extract useful information and subsequently gain knowledge is noted as worth pursuing in a customer-centric economy.

Corea [5] propose the use of specific database with CRM system in service desks for "such actions as recording notes on calls or searching for details of previous customer interactions". This would allow a group of customer service staff to track their efforts to address a complaint by a customer and to coordinate and progress a situation towards its resolution over time. Another such system proposed by [5] involves the use of a Lotus Notes system to hold procedure guidelines and policy documents useful in relation to queries handled by the service desk.

III. PROBLEMS EXPERIENCED WITH REGARDS TO SERVICE DESKS

A. Problems experienced by users

As noted earlier, with regard to the tax e-filing support, a major problem experienced by users relate to slow response from service desks contrary to the users' expectation. The user that is having difficulty with a system looks forward to the service desk for support and expects this support to come promptly so that the user can finish up the work he or she is doing, and move on with other issues in life. It is therefore totally unacceptable for such support to come weeks later.

In the case of the poster by SAA staff indicating that users should not turn their lack of planning into emergency on the part of the service provider, an investigation into the expectation of some customers reveal that most customers look up to the service provider to solve their problems whether the problems were caused by lack of planning on the customers' side or by other reasons. More specifically, most customers are willing to pay a little extra to have their problem solved rather than being too careful such as not changing flight dates. They believe that life is full of various intricacies that make it difficult to adequately plan ahead and stick to such plans. They belief that change is inevitable in life, especially in this competitively, busy and frequently changing economy.

Interestingly, on a follow up trip to SAA to obtain management's view of the poster by a staff member, another poster is found. This time, the poster is not merely typed, but color printed with SAA logos, indicating management's approval of such poster. The poster states that:

> "We understand that traveling can be a stressful experience but please don't take it out on our staff"

When some travelers were questioned on this poster, the general consensus is that they expect organizations like SAA to say something like:

> "We understand that traveling can be a stressful experience but be rest assured that our staff will do their utmost best to relief you of the stressful experience. Please help them to help you."

To further compound the case on SAA, a traveler narrated a bitter experience on SAA booking of flight. The traveler booked a flight for himself and his wife for a trip to Lagos costing a total of about $2000. The flight fee was paid using the husband's American Express credit card. Although a "fine-print" was indicated on the booking website that the credit card used for the ticket purchase must be presented on the day of travel, he assumed that this may not be a strict requirement as he had traveled many times and they have not bothered to ask him of the credit card used to pay. Also, he assumed that since he is not likely to use credit card in Lagos which operates a mainly cash economy, carrying the card along will be a security risk. Most importantly, he assumed that since the flight was booked using his name which is the same as the name on the credit card, there may not be any problem as no one can expect a credit card to be stolen and be used to buy ticket for the owner of the card. Furthermore, the ticket was bought about four weeks ahead, so he assumed that since no fraud was reported for four weeks, there should be no problem. Lastly, with the stress of traveling, he didn't think the whole issue through towards deciding to carry the card "in case" the airline insists.

However, on arriving at the airport, he was disallowed boarding the aircraft. He further explained that he had used the same card to buy many previous tickets and that he is a

member of the SAA voyager frequent flier program with long records. The airline refused and insisted that the only option is to buy another set of ticket and seek refund later with payment of administrative penalty. Fortunately, the traveler's wife mistakenly took along her own credit card, and that was used to buy another set of tickets.

In response to this problem, other travelers express their disgust. One noted that some service providers need a strong rebuke for stressing users further simply to maintain certain security. A similar example of such rebuke is the one given by USA president Barack Obama to the credit card companies in USA. Obama noted that users shouldn't have to fear various strings attached to services nor should they have to need a magnifying glass and a reference book in order to interpret information from service providers [17].

Bottleneck in logging requests: Apart from response delays in attending to requests, clients usually express frustrations in even logging their requests in the first instance. Various clients indicate that one of the reasons they don't like communicating with service desks is that one is usually directed to talk to machines or recorded messages which asks clients to press certain keys for certain options, and after that, they are presented with another set of keys for another set of options, etc. When such calls are made during the day, it costs the clients a lot. And when the telephone line drops before concluding with the service desks, maybe due to insufficient fund, one has to start afresh again.

Inability of service desks' staff to completely handle clients' cases: There are some clients' cases that service desks cannot completely handle or which they are not even competent enough to handle. Clients may therefore prefer to bypass the service desks and go maybe physically to the staff that they know could address their cases.

Clients sometimes experience inauthentic display during service encounters: Research has demonstrated the ability to distinguish authentic smiles from inauthentic smiles. Thus, clients' reactions to inauthentic displays are less positive than to an authentic smile [8].

B. Problems experienced by businesses

Management and employee of businesses experience problems with regards to service desks. These include:

Emotional clients: Emotional clients are very common today as compared to the situation in previous decades. This could be as a result of the current competitive global economy with various services competing for fewer clients and thereby making the clients to become oversensitive to outward expressions by service providers. The service providers are then expected to do every thing possible to please the clients because as noted by Steinberg & Figart in [8], "once an unhappy or dissatisfied customer walks out the door, they are gone forever!". The emotional clients can be compared with spouses in today's life that expect partners to do a lot for them, failure of which they are ready to go to the next highest bidder. It is in this similar way that today's businesses have big problems in building loyal clients.

Varied culture of clients: With today's global economy, clients are from different cultural backgrounds. Airlines like SAA serves people of different races, tribes and culture that flies to different countries of the world. It therefore becomes very difficult to exploit a norm or general way of doing things. For example, a service provider who makes eye contact with customers is likely to be perceived as honest and friendly. However, from the Central and Western African culture, a person that makes eye contact with elderly customer is considered disrespectful.

Availability of other factors that could be critical to service reactions: While much attention is being given to displays such as smiles during service encounters, many other factors beside interpersonal demeanor are also critical to target reactions e.g. when the reason for the exchange is economic [8]. In this case, getting financial profit by customers could be more important than receiving a friendly service. This could further be illustrated by the growth of budget airlines which are cheaper than other airlines but don't offer some services like meals which are known to entice customers. Businesses therefore have the problem of investing much in the provision of friendly service which will increase cost and may therefore be counter-productive.

Nonchalant attitude and incompetence of service desks' staff: Often times, either due to fatigue, incompetence or other forms of lack of motivations, service desks' staff behaves in a way that put clients off. Inadequate funds often make businesses to employ less qualified staff which are paid less salary and ended up being non-motivated. Unfortunately, there may be only one opportunity to win over a customer in a service encounter [8], and if that one opportunity is misused, clients may conclude negatively about the whole organization despite possibly other "good" employees at the back offices in the organization.

Associating value to the customer: Usually, the top management knows the real value of clients. Junior employees are likely to see each client as just any other client and knows that they would get other jobs in due time even if their current job fails. Top management and proprietors however may have real problems in starting over their company if the organization fails and so they value every client. Unfortunately, top management can not sit in front desks to monitor things. While there are various ways to monitor things, service desks staff needs to imbibe the attitude of top management and value customers.

Lack of recurrent training of service desk staff: Many service desk employees do not undergo regular training. Even for competent and qualified employees, the rate at which technology and business procedures change demand regular training and also self development. Employees often wait till formal training courses are organized for them.

Lack of adequate facilities: Many service desks lack adequate facilities to do their work effectively and promptly. Some respondents mentioned hearing the service desk's staff complaining about the slow computer or in some cases, asking same information many times. One would expect a fast system that would display relevant information in front of the service desk staff as clients are being attended to.

IV. PROPOSED RECOMMENDATIONS

It has been highlighted that each client is very valuable to an organization with possibly few opportunities to form an

impression of the services obtainable from the organization. It is desirable if such impression meets or even exceeds the customers' expectation. Towards achieving this, the followings are the proposed solution conceptual framework.

Impression management in service encounters: It is noted that impression management should be a critical part of the service provider's role in service encounters as service encounters personnel are often the first and only person with whom the public ever interacts [8]. This could explain why some organizations enforce display requirements such as appointing greeters, providing smiles and eye contact, etc. So, employees should go further than "simply pasting on a fake smile" but should put in effort to achieve authentic positive display by remaining positive and enthusiastic throughout the workday [8] so as to increase the overall value of the service encounter.

Individual attention, helpfulness courtesy and promptness: Personal touch is found to substantively affect customer satisfaction [1]. Therefore, individual attention, helpfulness, courtesy and promptness are strongly recommended in enhancing service.

Building competency: According to [8], impression management theorists have confirmed that "one can strategically create a positive impression by appearing both competent and likeable". Therefore employees can manage impressions of competence to enhance quality of service encounters by being efficient, available, accurate, and knowledgeable about products.

Training: Competence could be gained with regular training. Staff should be encouraged not to wait till formal trainings are organized for them but to keep abreast with the rate with which technology and business procedures change. This demands regular training and also self development. Various services have failed in situations where management failed to provide adequate support in terms of money and training [3]. Furthermore, as many respondents confirm the need for training, additional support for informal type of training between expert users of a service and new users is suggested. This could be linked to a reward system for a client that brings in a new client and brings the new client up to speed by way of informal training.

Rewards and resource investments: Managers of exemplary service organizations understand the need to put customers and frontline workers at the center of their focus using performance-linked compensation [11]. Rewards should be given to employees that perform well and those that takes regular training and self development serious. Rewards should also be given to clients to encourage them to make more use of service facilities. Good examples of such include the ABSA bank's free internet service introduced about a decade ago.

Creating value to the customer: Leonard [14] gives ways to make IT support customer-focused thereby creating value to the customer. These include: ensure that service desk staff understands sales; get them to know the names of the customers and the roles they play; always have a contact point (phone, e-mail); answer the phone and return e-mails; be available after hours. Furthermore, the organization should provide a path for customer complaints and follow each one up; do client satisfaction surveys regularly; send staff on customer service training and teach staff social skills – eye contact, how to write e-mails, etc [14].

Giving special attention to service request by phone: Since most commercial activity is done via phone, it is very important and critical to avoid non-answered calls, busy lines, asking customers to repeat the query many times or to give incoherent or incorrect answers [9]. A customer whose phone credit is depleting quickly won't be satisfied.

Monitoring, Performance tracking and reporting: Service desk staff should be well monitored given their strategic position in the organization. Systems should be in place to track their performance and report their activities. This could be useful in rewarding diligent ones as well as in disciplining erring ones. Where the service desk is part of the organization, there should be Service Level Agreement in place and where service desk is outsourced, there should be proper contract in place.

Planning: Service quality management studies suggest that "service firms spend too little effort on planning for service quality" [20]. Thus, the need for adequate planning for maintaining and increasing the quality of service desks in the organizations cannot be over-emphasized.

Provision of alternative modes of service: Given the problem of physically going to the service desk and the cost of phone calls to service desks, the need for alternative modes of service is necessary in addition to the present modes. Eng [7] suggests that customer satisfaction can be further enhanced with the use of e-customer service. Such alternative could be one that would accomplish the need for "encouraging customers to increase his/her level of participation in the delivery system so that he/she understands better the capabilities of the delivery process" [6]. An internet-based system or web-based portal fits such need as an alternative mode of service. For example, various organizations such as DHL and Post Office use such system to enable clients to track their posted documents thereby giving customers peace of mind even though their document has not yet reached the destination.

Enhancing system quality: It is noted that one of the reasons why organizations are investing in information systems is the improvement of the quality of services [2]. It is inferred that good system quality would positively contribute to service quality as the service employees are intermediate users of such system that could enable them to respond promptly to customers. Such quality systems proposed by [5] involving the use of specific database with CRM system in service desks for "such actions as recording notes on calls or searching for details of previous customer interactions" serve as good examples. These would allow a group of customer service staff to track their efforts to address a complaint by a customer and to coordinate and progress a situation towards its resolution over time. Another such system [5] involves the use of a Lotus Notes system to hold procedural guidelines and policy documents useful in relation to queries handled by the service desk. The quality of such system should be continually improved.

Encouraging customer-to-customer interaction: Although most cues that could modify customers' expectation come from server-customer interactions, customer–customer interactions are important [6]. For

example, a customer arriving at a service queue is likely to first ask information from those met on the queue before proceeding to confirm certain information from the service provider. This could explain the reasons why some service websites such as www.cheaptickets.com includes testimonies of clients that have previously experienced their service.

Encouraging use of different forms of documentation: Clients are likely to prefer having a comprehensive form of documentation which they can refer to later. Users even go the length of creating their own documentation for the service support for future reference and in some cases for sharing solutions to problems that may be encountered by others [18]. Various other forms of service documentation should be encouraged e.g. short message system (SMS), paper fliers, audio messages etc.

Communication and interpersonal skills for managing cues: According to [14], it is important to ascertain that the customer knows exactly what is going to be delivered, and that she/he understands what was delivered so that there are no unwarranted surprises. Also, it is noted that the importance of communication and interpersonal skills cannot be overemphasized given the need for service providers to directly influence expectations at the point of delivery [6]. This is more necessary as the client is bombarded with and experiences certain cues during the service delivery which "may serve as stimuli to confirm or disconfirm his/her expectations" [6]. For example, appropriately communicated information may disconfirm the exceptional feedback from an irrational client.

V. Conclusions

The service desk is a critical part of any service organization being the first point of contact with customers thereby holding the key to organizations' profitability. It is therefore recommended that organizations acknowledge the critical nature of the service desks by addressing the problems faced by clients and even by the business itself towards enhancing service desks customers' relationship management.

The principal goal of service desks should be to strive to meet and if possible, exceed customers' expectation. Coye [6] explains the need for interventions at critical points aimed at managing expectation by reducing the potential gap between customer expectations and perceived service delivery. Leonard [14] gives practical ways on managing expectation such as Strategic Plan, Service Level Agreements (SLAs), Performance tracking and reporting and Personal performance. SLAs identify the "service commitments of both service supplier and service buyer to each other at the boundary of their responsibilities" [12]. Larson [12] also notes that performance measurement of service delivery as a form of compliance with the SLAs is achieved using metrics such as availability, reliability, serviceability, response and user satisfaction.

In making IT support customer-focused, managing expectations "is not really about WHAT you do, but it is about the HOW in what you do to match up to your customer's expectation" [14]. Leonard [14] further emphasize the need to try to manage the level of

expectations, and if possible to EXCEED customer's expectations. These are aimed at limiting the gap between expectations and delivery. This, emphasize the need to ascertain that the customer knows exactly what is going to be delivered, and that she/he understands what was delivered to avoid unwarranted surprises [14].

In achieving the above goals, provision of adequate resources both to clients and service staff, training, impression management, monitoring and reward is very critical. Management would benefit more from inspiring authentic positive emotions in service workers in addition to ensuring good performance towards enhancing service desks' customers' relationship management.

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