

Customer care and quality

Customer care is nothing new. Top class nineteenth-century hotels and twentieth-century transatlantic liners were quite probably looking after their customers far better than most hotel guests are looked after today. What is new, however, is the 'industrialization' of customer care. As service businesses have become bigger, as more of the customers are dealt with by relatively untrained, perhaps uncommitted staff, frequently young and not particularly well versed in social skills, and as competition becomes more severe, the need arises for a systematic approach to ensuring that the target customers receive the service they expect.

Research by the University of Manchester Institute of Science and Technology (UMIST) classified organizations into

- uncommitted – Quality Initiatives (QI) not yet started
- drifters – QI started 18–36 months ago
- tool pushers – QI started 3–5 years ago
- improvers – QI started 5–8 years ago
- award winners – QI started probably some 10 years ago
- world class – QI started probably more than 10 years ago.

(source: Lascelles and Dale, 1993).

In the very best, the 'world class' organizations, customer care is clearly a responsibility of every single employee from the most junior to the chief executive.



In other organizations, however, customer care may be the responsibility of customer service or training departments, with little direct involvement of senior management. Many of the customer care initiatives of hospitality companies tend to fall into the 'tool pusher' category, at best. One indicator is that their quality initiatives, rather than being central to the company's policy, are given specific titles such as customer relations assistant.

In setting out to provide customers with what the operator thinks they expect, it is essential to recognize that the quality of service is influenced by a number of different factors. Some of these factors are only noticed by the customer if the factor is wrong in some way, as in the cases of room temperature and noise levels. Other factors contribute positively to the customer's experience, such as being recognized by the staff and being addressed by one's name. One can draw parallels with Herzberg's hygiene factors and motivators, which relate to employees' perceptions of their work experience (Herzberg, Mausrer and Snyderman, 1959; see Figure 2.5). In a seminal work regarding the development of service operations management, Gronroos (1994) indicates five characteristics of the subject area. First, the management of service quality and customer care must be a complete management perspective, impacting on the decisions and actions of all managers. Secondly, it must be driven by the consumer or the market in that the business needs to have a detailed analysis of the consumer demand and needs and expectations. Thirdly, it is a holistic approach, infiltrating all sections of the company from head office to unit management. Fourthly, that quality management and assurance is an integral feature of service management. Finally, that the human resource of the firm must be trained appropriately and motivated to be committed to the service quality strategy as part of the company's wider corporate strategy. Hence it is clear that there is a direct relationship between HRM and customer care, service and quality (see also Maxwell and Quail, 2002).

Today the majority of the British population experiences a wide range of service offerings, be they fast food, medical care, leisure or education. And the expectations of these consumers have been heightened, and are constantly raised, by these self-same service offerings. Concomitant with this has been the increasing similarity of many competing products, such as the basic similarity of features in a business class 4-star hotel, from satellite, interactive TV with internet access, to trouser press, hair-dryers, mini-bar and bathrobes. In many cases the search for product differentiation, the process by which a provider of a generic product makes the product different from competitors' products, has to be concentrated on the 'people interactions' involved. A classic example is the air transport industry, in which companies compete on similar, scheduled routes using similar aircraft. The main way by which such companies can gain competitive advantage and increase their market share at the expense of their competitors is to obtain the best flight slots and, increasingly now, to offer the best price, after which the only extra dimension they can add is that of better service; speedier check-in, better waiting arrangements and better in-flight food and cabin service.

Because 'customer care' has become fashionable, many organizations decide it is something they have to do. The problem is that, as Herzberg, Mausrer and Snyderman (1959) and many others showed with regard to employment, customer care is a highly complex issue. However, from the range of customer care programmes it is evident that many employers make assumptions about what the problem is. Very frequently it is apparent that the employer believes 'social skill'

training is either what is required or is all that can be afforded, whereas the fundamental problem may be one of design, delivery or even product quality. What may not have been done is to analyse customer care needs systematically, e.g. through the use of 'critical incidence techniques', although most experienced managers and staff do know what the key issues are.

There are, however, organizations that do this. The Sheraton Hotel group (part of Starwood Lodging), for example, runs a very sophisticated programme which involves regular assessment of the standards being achieved. Other organizations run customer care audits, some of which are carefully structured and some of which are not. As discussed in Chapter 1, the Hospitality Assured scheme championed by the BHA and the HCIMA is especially geared towards benchmarking and setting standards for service quality and pays particular attention to customer needs and satisfaction.

SERVQUAL (service quality)

This is one of the most well-reported approaches to evaluating the effectiveness of service delivery. The approach has been developed since the 1980s by Parasuraman, Zeithaml and Berry (1988). A major thrust of their work has been that service providers must learn more about their customers through rigorous market research. These researchers believe that, in spite of the intangibility of services, their quality can be measured.

SERVQUAL is based on a generic 22-item questionnaire that considers five broad aspects of service quality:

- tangibles (appearance of physical elements)
- reliability (dependability, accurate performance)
- responsiveness (promptness and helpfulness)
- assurance (competence, courtesy, credibility and security)
- empathy (easy access, good communications and customer understanding).

Customers are asked to complete a questionnaire; the first part identifies their expectations and the second part identifies their perceptions of the actual offering. Using a value (Likert) scale the value gap between expectations and perceptions of the offering can be determined.

This process identifies a company's strengths and weaknesses. Different weightings can be given to the various elements. From the results can be derived a list of priorities needing attention through the most appropriate means such as training or investment in equipment.

SERVQUAL goes on to identify five key gaps:

Gap 1: A gap between consumer expectations and management perceptions.

Managers think customers want one thing whereas the customers may prefer something else.

Gap 2: A gap between management perception and service quality specification.

Management may not specify clearly what is needed or they may set unachievable quality standards.

Gap 3: A gap between service quality specifications and service delivery. Simply put, a service provider fails to meet the standards set.

Gap 4: A gap between service delivery and external communications. This may result from expectations being unrealistically raised through intermediaries such as sales offices, agencies or promotional materials.

Gap 5: A gap between perceived service and expected service. This gap is the result of one or more of the previous gaps. Basically the customer does not get what he or she expects.

The SERVQUAL method then goes on to identify a zone of tolerance, which is effectively the zone between what customers expect and what they consider to be the minimum acceptable service level.

The traditional marketing mix approach

Traditionally, most students of marketing (and customer care is one vital dimension of marketing) have thought in terms of four elements making up the typical marketing mix: product, price, place and promotion. Bitner *et al.* (1985, 1989, 1990) developed a seven 'P' mix for service industries:

- 1 product – range, quality, level, brand name, service level
- 2 price – level, discrimination, quality/price/perceived value
- 3 place – location, accessibility, environs
- 4 promotion – advertising, sales promotion, publicity, public relations
- 5 people – training, discretion, commitment, incentives, appearance, behaviour/attitude
- 6 physical features – environment, design, furnishings, colour, layout, noise
- 7 process – procedures, flow of activities, customer involvement.

The present author, over a period of time, and through many personal experiences and observations, has concluded that another element has to be added: method of payment. This appears to be at the centre of so many causes of dissatisfaction (e.g. hotel morning checkout, supermarket checkouts) and also at the heart of so many promotional initiatives (one shop in Edinburgh advertised no fewer than 14 different methods of payment) that it needs to be separated out for the purpose of analysing the service offering.

Eight 'P's of the customer care mix – the 'service offering'

A careful analysis of most service operations and the wide range of customer care programmes will identify between four (usually the classic four 'P's of the marketing mix) and eight key dimensions. The eight are: product, place, physical evidence, process, price, payment, promotion and people. In essence these are the seven elements identified by Bitner *et al.*, but with the payment method added.

Product

Obviously, in providing a service, the first thing to get right is the essential element, the core product. In a hotel, the beds have to be comfortable and clean. The room has to be in a comfortable temperature and it has to provide the services expected. In a restaurant, hot food has to be hot and tasty. Much research shows, however, that

dissatisfaction with the core product is not a major cause of customer dissatisfaction. Rather the problems lie with one or more of the other 'P's of the mix.

Place

Paraphrasing the founder of the Hilton Corporation's famous dictum, 'There are three rules to success in the hotel business: location, location, location.' Although this may be a very sound advice, some very successful hospitality businesses have succeeded in spite of their location.

Place, or location, can embrace a number of different elements, including accessibility. Is the hotel or restaurant relatively easy to find and to get to? Is it by an airport, motorway junction or railway station? Does it have attractive features? Is it located in a place that people will want to visit? Is it located in an attractive town or rural setting? Is the location (e.g. a town or village) and the setting (e.g. a particular street) a strength or a weakness?

Physical evidence

Whilst the place itself might be an attraction and a strength, the actual physical ambience in which the core product is enjoyed may also be of crucial importance, e.g. the decor in themed restaurants. In other cases the physical ambience may be relatively unimportant when compared with the importance of the food on the plate.

In essence hoteliers or caterers can make decisions about how many senses they want to appeal to. This may be just the sense of taste or they can attempt to appeal to most, if not all, the senses of their customers through a combination of food, drink, decor, furnishings, air quality and music.

In addition customers may be seeking (sometimes subconsciously) clues about issues they consider important, such as hygiene, social recognition, esteem, etc. So, does the physical ambience meet these needs or expectations? Heskett (1986) strongly urges businesses to understand their customers and their needs in terms of not only the demographics but also their 'psychographics', how they think and feel about the product and service.

Process

The word 'process' is intended to describe all those experiences the customer goes through in order to enjoy the core product itself. Today, more than ever before, it is possible to acquire the same product through various different means. For example, it is possible to buy a product such as a pizza via restaurants, supermarkets, home delivery, telephone ordering and internet ordering. In all these cases the product might be the same or similar but the process itself may be an essential ingredient in the buying process.

In the case of hospitality products and services the 'process' can include elements such as reservation systems, car parking and signage. The process is distinct from, but closely related to, promotion, which includes advertising and merchandising. Sometimes the boundary will merge. As an example, an advertisement in a lift for a hotel's restaurant is not just providing the customer with useful information but is also promoting a profit centre.

For many people, the first step in buying a restaurant or hotel service consists of making a reservation. Is it as easy, efficient and friendly as possible? Is it easy to find the telephone number? Is it listed in an easy-to-find way in a directory? Is the telephone answered quickly and courteously? Are all staff trained to answer the phone and not leave it to someone else? How many people hesitate to telephone certain numbers because they know the number will be engaged? Some companies have a policy that the phone will always be answered within a certain prescribed time. Is the person passed from one to another before the booking is taken? Is there a set procedure for taking bookings, i.e. do all staff likely to take a booking, know what information is needed, e.g. a return telephone number, credit card number, table release time? Can staff quote with some accuracy the price of set menus or give indications of the cost per head of a meal? Do they understand the importance of making absolutely clear the prices quoted? Does a customer understand that the price quoted for a double room is a per-person price rather than a per-room price? Are they told of late arrival arrangements and room release times? Are customers told about extras; in buying holidays, for example, are all the extras quoted?

Arrival and access . . .

Is it easy for customers to find the establishment? Are they given a map or are they told of nearby landmarks? Are they told about car parking? Are the signs clear? Is international signage used? Are the 'Don't' signs friendly or are they aggressive? Is it easy to find one's way from the car park to the hotel, around the hotel, etc.? Is access safe and free of risk? Are car parks laid out so that ladies can park their cars close to the hotel reception?

Queuing . . .

If customers have to queue, there are some useful principles to know about queuing. If queuing is a 'lottery', i.e. some queues move faster than others, then customers are likely to feel very irritated if their queue is the slowest. Free-flow cafeteria systems have overcome some aspects of queuing problems. Hotels are introducing billing arrangements for the guest bedroom, i.e. the guest can view and check the bill on the bedroom TV, and use a fast check-out facility by simply leaving a completed form in a secure place at reception. Research has also shown that if customers are kept busy in the queue or whilst waiting, the waiting time is perceived as shorter. This is one reason why restaurants give customers menus to look at, bread rolls to eat and water to drink. It is not merely giving customers the sales catalogue to look at.

The increasingly common practice, in upmarket restaurants, of giving customers a tasty savoury before the hors-d'oeuvres also recognizes the importance of keeping customers busy. It may also help to 'exceed customer expectations'. If customers are acknowledged in a queue or whilst waiting, they are reassured and will find the queue less irksome. Good bar staff will acknowledge customers with eye contact, and maybe a short comment such as 'Be with you in a moment.'

Another fact known about queuing is that if customers know the likely duration of queuing this reduces a cause for irritation. The London Underground, rail networks and some bus companies have recognized this issue and now display the approximate waiting time for trains in many of their stations and bus stops. Likewise, customers do not feel that they are part of the process until they have

been acknowledged by the staff or are clearly part of a queue – hence the considerable irritation felt by many pub customers.

Apart from the actual queuing there is also ‘waiting time’. In a study (‘Survey of good service in fine-dining restaurants’, quoted in *Cornell Quarterly*, November 1988), it was reported that customers were prepared to wait for two minutes to be greeted. However, since waiting time is perceived as longer than occupied time the real time they are prepared to wait can be reduced dramatically to around 30 seconds. Effective service operators manage this element of the process. In a restaurant for example, ‘waiting time’ may be occupied by customers looking at menus and drinking an aperitif.

Some telephone waiting systems acknowledge this by repeatedly telling callers that they will be connected as soon as the line is free. Increasingly such telephone systems are telling the caller their place in the queue. Background music on telephones is there partly to let callers know that they are still connected. If the length of delay is known by the person waiting, it is less irksome than when the waiting period is unknown.

Menus

Are these clear and easy to follow? Are foreign languages translated? Many ethnic restaurants, and many English ones as well, make it difficult for the customer to know what he or she is ordering. If a restaurant has a significant number of foreign customers, are the menus translated into their languages? In many continental restaurants the menus are available in three or four different languages, making it easy for customers to order what they want. Otherwise customers who cannot understand a menu may go for a safe universal word such as ‘omelette’ rather than risking something they may not want.

A key element in the ‘process’ is to ensure that when the process breaks down, e.g. because of a delay, an overbooking or the like, the customer is informed as quickly as possible and given information about what is being done to put things right. The customer should be given reassurance and solutions.

Price

In many service operations the price and the method of payment are crucial factors in customer choice and satisfaction. Price is often (but by no means always) an indication of quality to be expected.

First, is the price clear and unambiguous? Some of the continental countries have recognized the importance of this aspect and have legislated for all-inclusive prices. The French *prix net* system tells the customer that VAT and service charge are included and that no extra payments are needed, although tips may still be expected! English menus are sometimes less clear in this regard, but generally there is an improvement in the level of information given to customers about pricing, in line with industry codes of practice.

Discounting can be a major sales tool but it can also be a cause of dissatisfaction for customers when they discover that they may be paying a very different price for the same product compared with another customer. This can happen both in small country-house hotels and in the world’s largest cruise liners. It can lead a customer who may well have been totally satisfied to feel dissatisfied merely because he or she has discovered that someone else got what he or she got for a cheaper price.

Having said that, there is also an increasing openness about variable pricing linked to yield management systems, such as the changing prices over time of flight tickets connected to the low-cost airlines. Some restaurants are openly promoting a similar approach, such as special prices at off-peak times of the day, especially where 'all-day' opening is a policy.

Payment

The method of payment also plays a crucial part in the service offering. This is evidenced by the number of traders who display that various credit cards and other forms of payment are accepted. Many customers will pay only by card and so traders may lose out by not accepting cards. Card companies estimate that spend per head is higher because customers can postpone or spread the day of reckoning by using their cards, as well as accumulating loyalty points or airmiles.

In the case of telephone bookings, are customers told that certain payments may not be acceptable?

Bill presentation is important too. Is it clear? Can the customer understand it? Is it properly itemized? Can customers get a receipt easily? Many caterers, particularly smaller ones, make giving a receipt a problem and yet for their business customers a receipt can represent a saving of around 35% of the cost of the meal, after VAT and income or corporation tax are taken into account.

In many cases customers want to have complete control over how much they spend. One of the reasons supermarkets are preferred by some customers to the local butcher shop, for example, is because the customer can look for a joint of meat that meets their budget precisely, rather than having to pay for what the butcher puts on the scales. Cafeterias and à la carte menus achieve this but sometimes set menus, the absence of half bottles on wine lists, etc., remove this degree of budget control from the customer.

Issues of importance in pricing include

- prices well displayed
- simple, easily understood prices
- clear, simple-to-understand bills
- easily obtained receipts
- easy methods of payment
- information about unacceptable methods of payment
- a simple approach to resolving payment problems
- ability of the customer to control spending
- value for money.

Promotion

Proper promotion depends upon a clear identification of the target market and use of the most appropriate media. The media may include various forms of advertising and merchandising. In some cases promotion may be an essential and significant item in the organization's budget. In other cases word-of-mouth recommendation may be quite sufficient to generate the required levels of business. Promotion is often the first contact a customer has with the enterprise. Does this contact contribute to customer satisfaction by creating the right level of expectations or is it the first

step in creating dissatisfaction by creating unrealistic expectations? Is it helpful? Is it correct? Is the business's promotion a strength or a weakness?

People

Finally, the degree to which an employer succeeds in ensuring that staff give customers the standard of service desired varies from employer to employer. Some employers pay most attention to setting strict procedures and training, whilst others may rely more on selection and giving staff a free hand. Other employers arrive at a combination of both.

In businesses such as restaurants, hotels and holiday companies, social skills obviously play a crucial role in the success of the enterprise. Many managers argue that these cannot be easily taught or learned and that the ideal is to concentrate on recruiting people with the right attitudes to customers. To do this successfully means that employers need to develop effective selection skills and some of the industry's leaders now devote resources to training their managers in selection interviewing skills.

Some organizations (e.g. TGIF and Disney) look for the skills of entertainers rather than the more traditional skills associated with restaurants and hotels. Consequently they virtually audition their applicants rather than interviewing them.

In many cases it is vital that staff have a good understanding of what the customer expects. Some employers consider that the best way of achieving this is to recruit staff who share similar life experiences with their customers. In some cases employers encourage their employees to use their facilities as customers, maybe in other establishments owned by the employer.

Some employers (e.g. De Vere Hotels) set out to develop in staff the awareness that they must 'own' problems that affect customers. This means that they must seek solutions, not look for ways to avoid solving problems. No one should walk past litter in an establishment, even if it is not in their section. No one should leave a telephone ringing if there is no one else ready to answer it. No one should leave a customer with a problem, saying, 'Sorry, this is not my section.'

Some forms of training concentrate on teaching the staff certain 'scripts', such as 'Good day, how may I help you?' or teaching the staff to use a customer's name or to reply in a particular way to a telephone call. Others may be less prescriptive but may still require certain rituals to be observed. Sheraton for example sets a variety of 'Sheraton Guest Satisfaction Standards'. Figure 23.1 shows one such standard.

HANDOUT 1-1

**Sheraton
Guest Satisfaction Standards**

- 1 Every time you see a guest, smile and offer an appropriate hospitality comment.
- 2 Speak to every guest in a friendly, enthusiastic and courteous tone and manner.
- 3 Answer guest questions and requests quickly and efficiently, or take personal responsibility to get the answers.
- 4 Anticipate guest needs and resolve guest problems.

Figure 23.1 A Sheraton Guest Satisfaction Standard

Radisson Hotels run a 'Yes I Can' programme, which sets out to train staff so that they never say 'no' to a customer. Specific selling skills may also be developed. For example, one of the leading fast food chains trains staff to attempt to 'upsell' one item more than the customer has ordered but never two or more.

Transactional analysis

Other training will be concerned with developing attitudes and skills based on certain schools of psychology, such as 'transactional analysis' (TA; see Berne, 1976), which sets out to develop a person's ability to recognize a customer's personality state and to respond with an appropriate one. It has been used over many years as a form of customer care training by a wide range of organizations including many hotel and airline companies. It is described here in a little detail to illustrate one such approach – there are many others.

Transactional analysis sets out to analyse the nature of the individual personality states involved in transactions between people, and the nature of the transactions themselves. Each normal individual's personality consists of three separate but interacting personality states or elements: the Parent, the Adult, and the Child.

The Parent is derived from experiences of authority figures including parents and parent substitutes such as teachers, the police, etc.

The Child part of the personality draws upon the person's experiences, particularly the feelings and emotions, of childhood. For example the trepidation felt by many employees when the boss says 'I want to talk to you', may be to do with the memory many people have of how worried they were when their own father said just these words. There may be nothing to worry about but certain phrases and situations cause involuntary recall of certain experiences.

The Adult part of a person's personality functions rationally. It does not mimic parental attitudes nor does it react emotionally. The Adult part of the personality receives information from outside, from the Parent part of the personality and from the Child part of the personality as well. It questions the validity of the information from each source and it then attempts to produce a rational result. This is based neither on what is expected by the Parent nor on what is wanted by the Child.

A person with a strong Adult is often described as mature or well balanced. One with a strong Child may be described as immature and one with a strong Parent as too rigid.

When two people meet, therefore, the three parts of each person's personality are involved and the outcome of the meeting or transaction will be dependent entirely upon which part of each person's personality is involved. Every transaction is a two-way affair – with one person communicating in the first instance (providing the stimulus) and the other responding (making the response).

In the simplest transactions the arrows are parallel and these are called complementary transactions, as shown in Figure 23.2. If the arrows remain parallel – i.e. when the transactions are complementary – communication may proceed indefinitely.

Figure 23.2 shows a simple example of a Parent-type communication receiving a Child response. An illustration of such a transaction would be a domineering executive booking in at a reception desk manned by a receptionist who reacts as an obedient, submissive 'child' to the executive 'parent'. The interaction or 'transaction', as such processes are called, could continue for some time.

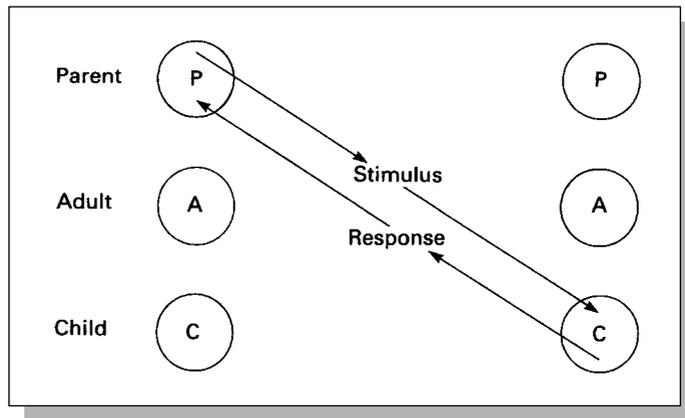


Figure 23.2 A complementary transaction

Figure 23.3 shows a crossed transaction – the type of transaction that apparently causes most trouble. An example of this is when a waitress asks (in Adult fashion) for the meals for a particular table and the chef replies that everyone is in a rush and that he needs more staff in any case, replying much as a child often does when irritated by a parent.

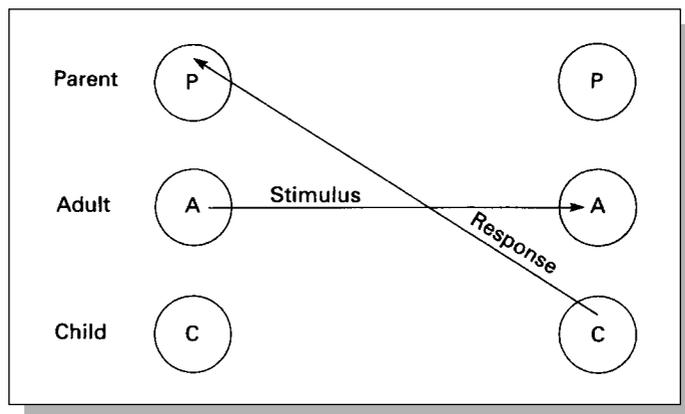


Figure 23.3 A crossed transaction

The transaction breaks down because the chef raised issues that were not relevant to the rational request of the waitress. It was not an Adult reply but a Child reply to an Adult request. The only probable solution to this Child response is for the manager (a Parent figure) to order the chef to produce the goods or for the waitress to switch on the chef's Parent. This would then keep the second part of the transaction upon parallel lines. These complementary and crossed transactions are simple one-level transactions.

But beyond these there are two types of ulterior or 'two-level' transactions. On the surface we see a complementary Adult-to-Adult transaction but the stimulus

may be a sales hook appealing to the Child in the respondent. For example, to offer sweets from the sweet trolley or, at the other extreme, an executive jet to a chief executive can be made to sound very Adult, with Adult reasoning put forward in justification. But all along the offer – the stimulus – may really be appealing to the Child. In this case the respondent may respond to the stimulus in a Child way: ‘I want it and I will have it’ (Figure 23.4).

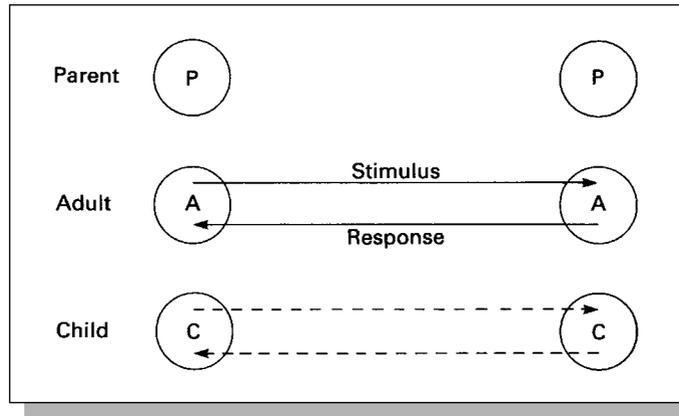


Figure 23.4 A two-level transaction

Types of transactions

The principal interactions or transactions that take place between people are divided into several basic types:

- procedures
- rituals
- activities and work
- pastimes
- operations
- games.

Procedures

The ‘procedure’ is a series of transactions between two people at an Adult level, and is concerned with achieving objectives as effectively as possible – objectives that are normally understood by each person. Booking a hotel guest into a hotel under normal circumstances is a procedure because one person wants a room and the receptionist wants to sell the room.

Rituals

‘Rituals’ consist of a series of stereotyped transactions, which may be informal or highly formalized. An informal ritual takes place when two close friends meet, shake hands and ask about one another’s families. A more formalized ritual takes

place between complete strangers and in many commercial transactions, e.g. when buying something in a shop. Rituals are the safest form of transaction because the outcome is predictable.

Activities or work

Activities or work transactions are programmed by the work itself, e.g. by the material or the system. During the activity there is no need for involvement with others – there may be a need, but it is not essential. The outcome again is predictable and therefore work is the next safest form of interchange between individuals.

Pastimes

After activities or work come pastimes. Pastimes are like social skirmishing – getting to know more about the other person in order to decide whether to proceed to ‘games’.

Operations

An operation occurs when one person states his needs frankly and the other person, the respondent, satisfies these needs without taking advantage of the situation. Operations, no matter how often they are repeated, are to be distinguished from games and also from rituals and pastimes.

Games

‘Games’, though appearing to be operations, are ulterior transactions between people, which have psychological payoffs or rewards. They are normally repetitive but repetition in itself does not make the transaction a game. There must be a payoff. For example, if an employee regularly seeks reassurance that he or she is doing his or her job satisfactorily and when reassured goes away content, then there is no ulterior motive and therefore a game is not being played. But if after receiving several reassurances he or she were to say ‘in that case I want an increase in pay’, then there was an ulterior motive and he or she has conned his boss. He has played a ‘game’ with his boss, who probably now feels aggrieved that a normal human response – to give reassurance where it was merited – has been used against him for an ulterior or unexpected motive.

Within the hotel and restaurant world, where personal transactions are the very essence of the business, all of these types of transactions are possible and in many cases guests or staff will move rapidly from the ritual stage to the games stage. Once games are being played, unfortunately, either guests or a member of staff can suffer. As a consequence and to ensure that this does not happen, particularly to socially inexperienced staff such as young ones or newcomers from a business with less public contact, it is wise to build up a defence of rituals that will direct their social contacts with their guests. Some will argue that this will result in too much uniformity and lack of individual personality showing through. This could be the case if taken too far, but in the absence of rituals there is far too much game playing between guests and staff, leading to one or the other being hurt, so if rituals are designed carefully to meet all the more common, workaday transactions between staff and guests, a good deal of the hurtful game-playing that takes place will be eliminated.

Generally, the rituals need to be simple. Many socially aware managers have recognized the need and have ensured that their staff are trained to use them. There are, within a hotel context, two main types.

First, a regular ritual is one used when something normal and routine occurs. For example, when a guest arrives to book in, a strictly laid down script could be followed, which covers the various alternatives such as

- a guest with a confirmed booking
- a guest with a booking but no confirmation
- a chance guest.

The second ritual is one developed to deal with the non-routine events that occur from time to time – such as dealing with an overbooking or an incorrect booking.

In both cases one has to design a ritual that is acceptable to the Adult part of a person's personality. Frequently, particularly in the case of dealing with complaints, a situation immediately switches on the Child or the Parent in a personality. The Child has not got what they wanted. The consequence is that – as with dealing with young children – reason will not prevail in any event. And only when something switches on the Adult again will reason prevail. Frequently this occurs only after there has been a change of personalities involved – and the receptionist who has failed to placate an irate guest is surprised to see the manager deal with the situation very smoothly. It is not necessarily because of the manager's extra skill but only because the change of personalities enables the irate guest's Adult to be switched on again.

Different approaches to customer care

Frances Sacker, of the Industrial Society, in her article 'Customer service training in context' (*Personnel Management*, March 1987) divided training into two main types, the 'evangelical' and the 'exploratory' styles. This appears to be still relevant today. The evangelical style is aimed at creating 'a high degree of excitement and enthusiasm' whereas the exploratory style is concerned with giving individuals 'the opportunity, through discussion, video, etc., to make decisions about their own behaviour and about practical actions they can take to improve their own performance'.

The organization's needs, the resources they have available for training and the calibre of their staff all contribute towards decisions about the most appropriate approach to training. Obviously the question arises as to which is more important – the ability to select well or to train well. Many personnel specialists take the view, however, that training is only likely to be effective if the right calibre of person is recruited in the first place, and works alongside service-quality committed colleagues within an appropriately reinforced, service-oriented atmosphere and culture.

Selecting and motivating staff

In looking at the customer care mix it is apparent that there is considerable dependence between the separate elements of the mix (whether 4, 5, 6, 7 or 8). However, it is vital that the approach to staffing is correct as well, including recruiting staff with correct attitudes, training them and rewarding them appropriately. In the case of the Sheraton programme, employee recognition features as a key element (Figure 23.5).

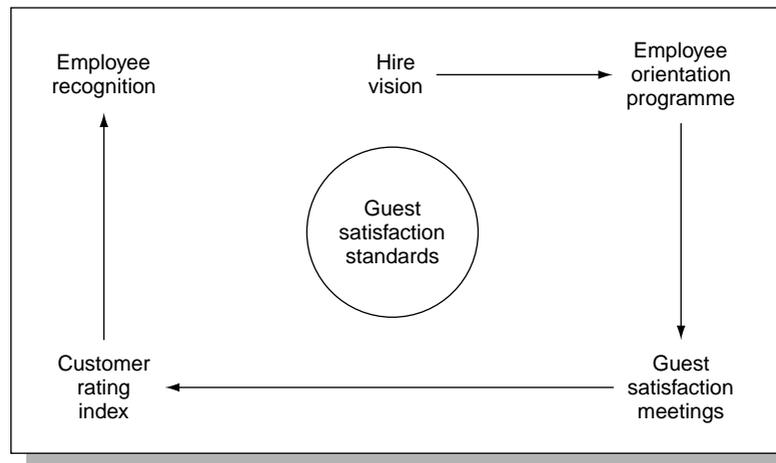


Figure 23.5 The Sheraton customer care cycle

In the case of Barclays Bank the fourth declared objective of their programme was ‘to reinforce the objectives with accountability and recognition’. If an employer claims that customer care is so crucial to the success of the enterprise then the employer must demonstrate that commitment by developing proper rewards. This could be in the form of bonuses, but many programmes involving rewards appear to use other forms of employee incentive. Several of the large hotel groups and airlines, for example, select the ‘employee of the month’ from the workforce and reward accordingly. Sometimes these are selected by management, sometimes by customers. Unfortunately, many such schemes are known by the staff to be manipulated – the award going to each department in turn. It could be argued, however, that such approaches to motivation are external or extrinsic to a proper customer care programme. Instead a good programme, which is also concerned with recruiting the right staff, itself engages the interest of the staff and of itself provides the necessary motivation. Marriott developed a scheme whereby staff accumulated points for excellent service standards, customer complements and the like, and could exchange certain numbers of points for gifts from a glossy catalogue.

The need for a policy and diagnosis

An increasing number of companies have customer care policies, sometimes displayed in customer areas, e.g. in reception areas, on price lists, brochures and the like. Sometimes customer care plans derive from customer care analysis. The BHA Scher scheme gives participating companies important indicators of performance standards achievement. Sheraton Hotels (and many other companies as well) have a regular customer rating process (see Figure 23.5) which provides each unit with its own customer rating index and its rating relative to other similar Sheraton hotels. Some companies set out to measure accurately the cost of poor customer care. One measure used by a North American company is the number of abandoned telephone enquiries (their monthly target is 3% maximum) and what this represents as lost revenue to the company.

A diagnostic tool

One integrated approach (developed and used by the author and colleagues from the University of Brighton), called Bullseye, provided a flexible instrument designed specifically for each customer care situation. It consisted of a number of separate elements:

- 1 The initial research identified the organization’s expectations. This research included management, operative staff and, of course, customers and potential customers of the organization.
- 2 Preparation of a questionnaire to be used for evaluation of the existing level of customer care (Figure 23.6A).
- 3 A Bullseye scoring sheet, which determined the actual level of achievement for each of the key elements (Figure 23.6B).
- 4 An ‘improvement plan’, which could be based on an MbO and/or quality circles approach.

Typically this approach fits well into Frances Sacker’s ‘exploratory’ style – because it provides the basis for the participants to develop their own solutions to the problems they themselves have identified. Of course if an organization moves down the MbO, quality circles or empowerment route other issues emerge such as the need to train all management and operative staff in the effective operation of such an approach.

It should be evident from the above that effective customer care consists of a number of interdependent elements, some quite complex, some simple in themselves. In most cases effective customer care is likely to involve senior management commitment and the involvement of the whole workforce. It can also involve major investment in hardware such as buildings, equipment, etc. A simple outline of what can be involved is shown in Figures 23.7 and 23.8.

A. The questionnaire

| | Positive + | Neutral | Negative – |
|-------------------------------|------------|---------|------------|
| Food temperature | | | |
| Signposting | | | |
| Value for money | | | |
| Sensitivity towards customers | | | |
| Drink temperature | | | |
| Menu information/explanation | | | |
| Payment system | | | |
| Ability to adapt | | | |
| Presentation | | | |
| Queuing | | | |
| Bill clarity | | | |
| Cleanliness of uniform | | | |
| Aroma of food | | | |
| Waiting time | | | |
| Price display | | | |
| Appearance | | | |
| Freshness | | | |
| Service | | | |
| Exchange of money | | | |

Figure 23.6 A customer care evaluation scheme (Cross Channel Ferries)

| | Positive + | Neutral | Negative - |
|-----------------------------------|------------|---------|------------|
| Skill | | | |
| Taste | | | |
| Opening time | | | |
| Methods of payment (cheque, cash) | | | |
| Language | | | |
| Value for money | | | |
| Hygiene | | | |
| Usefulness | | | |
| Courtesy | | | |
| Appropriateness of dishes | | | |
| Ambience | | | |
| Dealing with a problem (payment) | | | |
| Understanding problems | | | |
| Product range | | | |
| Comfort | | | |
| Resolving complaints | | | |
| Shipboard knowledge | | | |
| Portion size | | | |
| Heating | | | |
| Budget control | | | |
| General knowledge | | | |

Each item, to be evaluated, relates to one of the four 'Ps':

- product
- process
- price and payment
- people

B. Score sheet

| | Question | P | Question | P | Question | P | Question | P |
|-------|-----------|---|-----------|---|---------------------|---|----------|---|
| | 1 | | 2 | | 3 | | 4 | |
| | 5 | | 6 | | 7 | | 8 | |
| | 9 | | 10 | | 11 | | 12 | |
| | 13 | | 14 | | 15 | | 16 | |
| | 17 | | 18 | | 19 | | 20 | |
| | 21 | | 22 | | 23 | | 24 | |
| | 25 | | 26 | | 27 | | 28 | |
| | 29 | | 30 | | 31 | | 32 | |
| | 33 | | 34 | | 35 | | 36 | |
| | 37 | | 38 | | 39 | | 40 | |
| Total | (product) | | (process) | | (price/ payment) | | (people) | |

Figure 23.6 *continued*

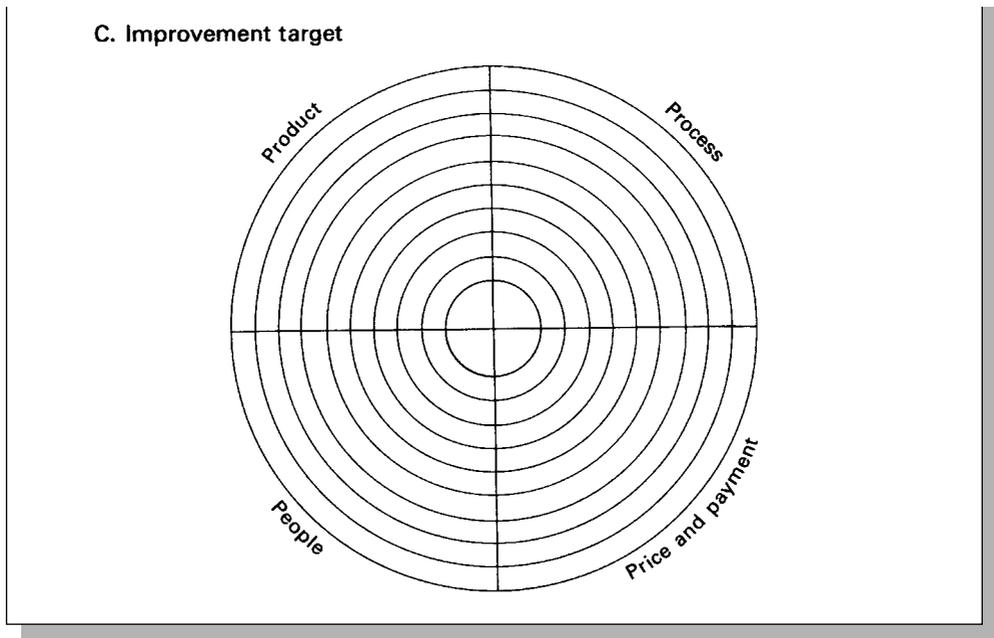


Figure 23.6 continued

| What the customer wants | What the caterer or hotelier should do | How |
|---|--|---|
| Information | Inform the customer | Use positive, friendly helpful notice, not warnings and admonishments |
| Fairness | Design ordering procedures and queues to eliminate unfairness | Ensure that customer perceives ordering procedures and queues as fair, i.e. first come, first served |
| Activity | Keep customers actively involved in the 3 phases of a meal 1 pre-queuing 2 queuing 3 the meal | Involve customer as much as possible in the process, e.g. looking at menus |
| Attention | Greet and/acknowledge customer, top-up glasses, remove used plates | Use scripts, eye-contact, body language, develop perception skills |
| 'Strokes' | Make each customer feel special | Use customer name, compliment |
| Reassurance | Keep customer informed, reassured | Devise scripts and/or procedures |
| Timely service (and an idea of the time he/she will have to wait) | Provide timely service and keep customer informed | Set standards, control standards, informing customers of waiting times |
| Courtesy | Provide courteous staff and service | Personal grooming, deportment, devise systems and routines and train staff Develop attitudes and empathy |
| Feedback system and ability to complain | Design an effective procedure for customer feedbacks, particularly complaints | Devise a policy and procedures provide training |

Figure 23.7 Elements of a customer care programme

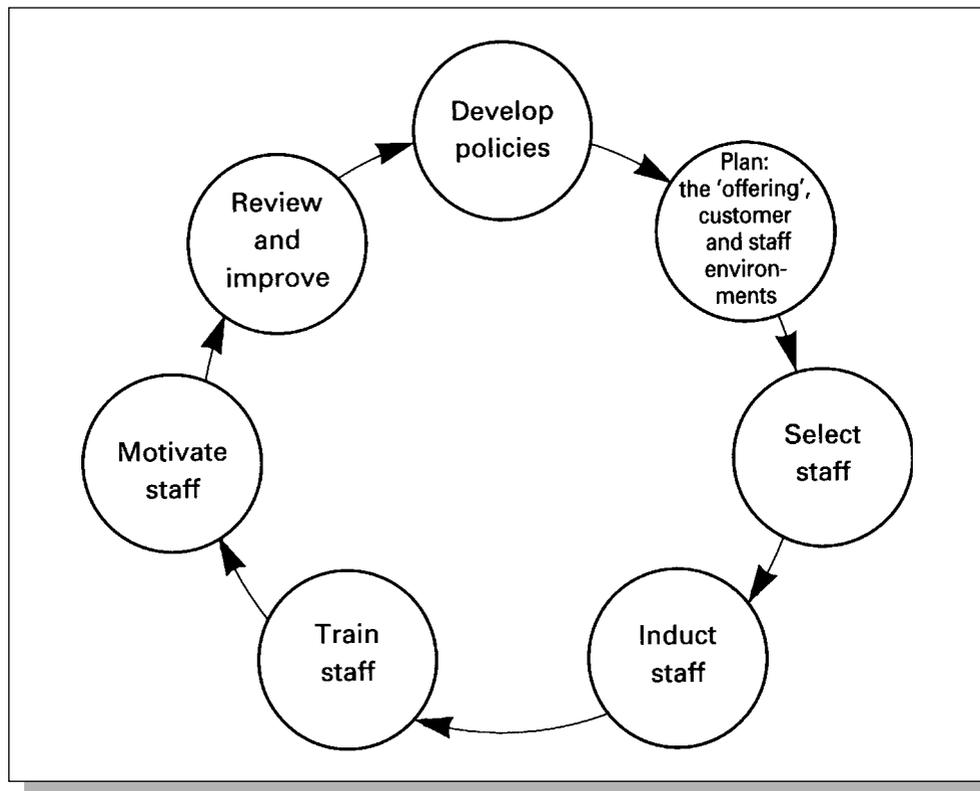


Figure 23.8 The customer care process

Further Reading and References

- Berne, E. (1975) *What Do You Say after You Say Hello*, London: Corgi.
- Berne, E. (1976) *Games People Play*, London: Penguin.
- Bitner, M. J., Booms, B. H. and Tetreault, M. S. (1989) Critical incidents in service encounter, in Bitner, M. J. and Crosby, L. A. (eds) *Designing a Winning Service Strategy*, American Marketing Association.
- Bitner, M. J., Booms, B. H. and Tetreault, M. S. (1990) The service encounter: Diagnosing favourable and unfavourable incidents, *Journal of Marketing*, Vol. 54, January, pp. 71–84.
- Bitner, M. J., Nyquist, J. D. and Booms, B. H. (1985) The critical incident as a technique for analysing the service encounter, in Block, T. M., Upah, G. D. and Zeithaml, V. A. (eds) *Services Marketing in a Changing Environment*, American Marketing Association.
- East, J. (1993) *Managing Quality in the Catering Industry*, London: Croner Publications.
- Gronroos, C. (1994) From scientific management to service management: A management perspective for the age of service competition, in *International Journal of Service Industry Management*, Vol. 5, No. 1, 5–20.
- Herzberg, F., Mausner, B. and Snyderman, B. (1959) *The Motivation to Work*, New York: Wiley.
- Heskett, J. L. (1986) *Managing in the Service Economy*, Mass.: Harvard Business School Press.
- Johnson, R. (1989) Operations management issues, in Jones, P. (ed.) *Management in Service Industries*, London: Pitman.

- Jones, P. and Lockwood, A. (1989) *The Management of Hotel Operations*, London: Cassell.
- Lascelles, D. and Dale, B. (1993) *The Road to Quality*, Bedford: IFS.
- Lucas, R. (2004) *Employment Relations in the Hospitality and Tourism Industries*, London: Routledge.
- Maxwell, G. and Quail, S. (2002) Human resources strategy and development for quality service in the international hotel sector, in D'Annunzio-Green, Maxwell, G. and Watson, S. (eds) *Human Resource Management*, London: Continuum.
- Parasuraman, A., Zeithaml, V. and Berry, L. L. (1988) Servqual: A multiple item scale for measuring consumer perceptions of service, *Quality Journal of Retailing*, Vol. 64, No. 1.
- Teare, R. and Olsen, M. (eds) (1998) *International Hospitality Management*, London: Pitman Publishing.
- Zeithaml, V. A. and Bitner, M. J. (1996) *Services Marketing*, McGraw-Hill International.

Questions

- 1 Describe the key elements that need to be considered relative to customer care.
- 2 What constitutes the service offering from a customer care perspective?
- 3 What can be done to minimize dissatisfaction caused by queuing?
- 4 Discuss the value of transactional analysis to a work organization.
- 5 Evaluate the effectiveness of the customer care approach of an employer with whom you are familiar.
- 6 Design a customer care programme for an employer with whom you are familiar.
- 7 What issues will need to be considered in designing customer care programmes in the future?