

Front office customer care in Open and Distance Learning: In the eyes of the Zimbabwe Open University students in Masvingo region

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Abstract

Customer care is the contemporary issue in the service provision in distance education. Open and Distance Learning institutions have to be razor sharp in the way they offer services to the clientele through the front office. The study sought to investigate students' expectations of the front office customer care as different students are served. A convenient sample of 50 returning students, 30 females and 20 males in the first semester of 2011 academic year participated in the study. The study used a qualitative research design whereby questionnaires with open-ended items, solicited responses pertaining to students' expectations of the front office customer care. Data was qualitatively analysed thematically. Findings indicated that, the front office personnel give the organisation an image. The study also revealed that the front office of Masvingo regional campus staff is not supportive to student challenges and front office staff lack adequate information concerning students. The study recommended the region to staff develop the front office in customer care, reception, public relation and training interpersonal skills to deal with even the most abusive students.

Key words: Customer care, front office, Open and Distance Learning, public relations

Background to the study

In the modern management of the Open and Distance Learning institution the concept of customer care is highly emphasised. The level of competition between the Open and Distance Learning institutions with the conventional universities and other higher learning institutions is growing at an alarming rate. Universities in the Open and Distance Learning category, like the Zimbabwe Open University, have to make sure that their customer care is at most of supreme quality in order for them to attract students to their institutions. Open and Distance Learning institutions are supposed to craft a positive relationship with the clientele. Cravens and Piercy (2003) developed the Customer Relationship Management systems. The relationship that exists between the Open and Distance Learning institution and the student is expected to be of high grade. What can be inferred here is that, the Open and Distance Education institution should construct and manage the relationship with the customer more effectively by integrating all needed information sources and provide seamlessness at the point of contact with the students, (Cravens and Piercy 2003). It is a requisite for the higher education institutions to provide adequate information at the front office as the students walk in for service reception and advisement.

It is imperative for the Open and Distance Learning institutions to develop some workable means of retaining students in their institutions. The front office is actually responsible for the communication of any pertinent information to the students. According to Cravens and Piercy, (2003) communication with the clients is an important promotional activity. Therefore the front office in the Open and Distance Learning should sound like a promotional tool for the university in the way it handles the students. It is the front office that is mandated with creating awareness of the pertinent information that the university wishes to convey to the students in order to promote their learning. This system will make the universities in Open and Distance Learning situation receive repeated purchases of their services, attract new customers and encouraging long-term relationships with the existing customers.

Customer as the first policy sounds like an old adage but still works in the contemporary environment of the Open and Distance Learning institutions. The front office bearers are the torch bearers for the marketing of the university in the face of stiff competition that comes from the introduction of parallel programmes by the conventional university such as Midland State University and Great Zimbabwe in Zimbabwe to mention just a

few. To survive in that predicament the Open and Distance Learning institutions must have good information about how the customers should be handled at the reception point in the university.

The front office staff have to know that the Open and Distance learner is not homogenous but the heterogeneity, Kuveya (2001), among the students has to be synchronised into harmonious means of satisfying the student to the best advantage of the university for student retention and attraction on the background of stiff competition imposed by the conventional universities. The students are a delicate and sophisticated product of the university that need to be handled with great care. Their lifestyles have little patience for retailers who do not understand them or will not adapt their service practices to meet their needs, (Kay (1997). The universities in the Open and Distance Learning category are the retailers who have to meet the specifications of the client in their endeavour to meet their survival goal in the competitive environment. As the students in Open and Distance Learning students visit the offices expecting to be serviced fast and conveniently. Needham and Dransfield (1995) argue that the client expects the delivery of the service to be faster and more conveniently and they have no qualms, (Kay 1997) about switching to competitors if their demands are not met.

In the light of illuminating completion from the conventional institutions that are blindly offering open and distance education in the guise of parallel programmes, the Open and Distance Learning institutions are compelled to be customer focused by building long term satisfying relationships with the customer (student). The role is actually performed by the front office in terms of how they handle the students as they come for service at the regional offices. The front office is the face of the university in the eyes of the students. What the front office bearers do to the student speaks volumes to the student about the university. The reaction of the student to how he/she has been treated with the front office staff determines the retention and the repeated purchase and attraction of prospective students. It is the role of the front office staff to do relationship marketing.

The relationship between the student and the institution of Open and Distance Learning does not end with the sales transaction; instead, it is viewed as an on going process. The front office as the marketing team for Open and Distance Learning institutions should sound the bell that the relationship between the student and the student get smarter with each customer conversation as this allows the front office a chance to learn something about the customers and change the way you offer the service to the students to meet their expectations. What ever action is taken by the front office bearer is observed and assessed by the student and the core cards will determine the success and survival of the Open and Distance Learning institutions in the face of current stiff competition imposed by the conventional universities in Zimbabwe.

The student population in the Zimbabwe Open University comprises individual students from all walks of life, that is, the rich and the poor, ministers of religion, politicians, farmers, chief executives of big corporations, just to mention a few. One is forced to accept the concept of one to one student management at the front office. This is individualising the public relations of the front office staff to deal with student population heterogeneity to the advantage of winning them in the face of stiff competition. The capability of the front office staff to implement the one to one marketing through identifying customers, differentiating them, interacting with them and customising the service to fit each individual student will take the Open and Distance Learning institutions a long way in defending their position in the competitive higher education environment.

Great customer service is the cornerstone of any successful Open and Distance Learning institution in the higher education environment which is characterised by neck to neck competition for the available student population. It is imperative for the Open and Distance Learning institutions to know who their customers are and what they want and exceeding their expectations. Kathy (2010) concurs that unless the higher education institution understands this basic principle, they will have a difficult time in attracting students and the desired results of the corporation.

Objectives of the study

The study sought to determine the strategies that can be employed by the front office staff in Open and Distance Learning institutions to service the diversified student population in the Zimbabwe Open University's Masvingo regional campus in the face of stiff competition from the conventional universities that have started to provide university education through distance learning mode in the guise of parallel programmes.

Statement of the problem

Currently, the Zimbabwe Open University is the sole supplier of university education using the Open and Distance Learning mode. The university is facing stiff competition from the conventional universities dotted around the country which have started to provide university education through distance learning mode in the guise of parallel programmes. This places emphasis on the Zimbabwe Open University front office staff to develop skills in handling the heterogeneous student population that is being served by the region in order for the university to survive in the turbulent higher education environment. The Zimbabwe Open University is the sole

supplier of higher education through distance learning mode. The university was commissioned by the act of parliament in 1999. The whole issue points to the need for the front office staff to deal with the students in such a manner that attracts and return students in the university to the best advantage of competition in the higher education environment characterised by neck to neck competition from the conventional universities. Thus the problem can be stated as, “What are the expectations students on front office customer care; in the eyes of the students in the Zimbabwe Open University’s Masvingo regional campus.”

Research questions

The study was guided by the following research questions:

- What does the heterogeneous student population expect from the front office staff when serving them?
- How can the Zimbabwe Open University’s Masvingo regional campus staff improve customer care for Open and Distance learners to outwit competitors in the competitive higher education environment?

Significance of the study

This study will help Zimbabwe Open University in establishing strategies that can be employed by the front office in dealing with the heterogeneous student population as a means to survive in the turbulent higher education environment where competition for the students is neck to neck with the conventional universities that are providing distance education in the guise of parallel programmes. The study intends to equip the front office with the skills of handling even the most abusive students in the region and continue to provide quality service to the diversified student population in the region and survive in the contemporary higher education. The front office will start to recognise that they are the first port of call and are therefore the front line marketing team of the university in terms of student retention and recruitment.

Conceptual framework: The concept of customer care in Open and Distance Learning

Customer care is very crucial for the survival of any business (Kuveya 2004). Institutions in the higher education and in particular those in the Open and Distance Learning should have very good customer care for the retention and attraction of students. The Zimbabwe Open University is such an institution that should develop good public relations with the students. The students in the Zimbabwe Open University are a heterogeneous population that requires the front office to practice beam filled customer care in the way they attend to the students as they come for service to the university. Customer care emphasises the importance of attitudes and covers every aspect of the organisation’s relationship with its clientele. Customer care closes the gap between the students’ expectations and their experiences (Kongthon 2009).

Customer care includes all aspects of a customer’s expectations and experiences in dealing with an organisation (The Times Newspaper, 2011). In terms of business customer care represents an overall description of the desired relationship between the university and the student population which is so heterogeneous. In this regard the word service or care is based on the premise that every commercial transaction between the student and the university is a service. When students visit the University, for various services, they should be able to get the highest satisfaction in return from the university. This is usually associated with the way they are served by the front office in the university. The front office staffs acts as the front line marketing team of the university as they are the ones that have to wear the human face of the organisation that is seen by the students as they visit the institution for various services the university renders them.

According to Turban (2002) customer service is one of the most important ingredients of the marketing mix for the service provision to the students in Open and Distance Learning scenarios. High quality service offered to the heterogeneous student population by the front office staff adds value and helps to create customer loyalty. Customers today are not only interested in the service in higher education they are offered by the institutions but by all the additional treatment they get from those who are administering such services to them (Selden 1998), from the greeting they get from the front office staff (Lunch lesson four-customer service 2003) and the help they receive when they have a complaint about an issue that pertain to their studies with the university (Dall et al 2004).

Customer care in the Open and Distance Learning is the responsibility of everyone who has the direct interaction with the students. In the Zimbabwe Open University those who deal with the students directly are the reception office and the accounts staff, module issuing staff, the grounds personnel and those who deal with students’ assignments and records in the various departments of the four faculties of the university. This implies that the issue of customer care should be seen as a series of activities designed to enhance the level of customer satisfaction. Solomon (2010) suggests that customer care is the feeling that a service has met the customer expectations and if fulfilled all the time the individual customer will have a repeated transaction with the institution. It is therefore imperative for the front office staff in the Open and Distance Learning institutions to

make sure that their endeavour with the students, despite their heterogeneity, is striving to reach the highest level of customer care. Selden (1998) purports that customer support is a range of services assisted to differentiated customers for the institution in a cost effective and correct service at the right time. This will maintain the positive relationship between the university and the student population.

Kuveya (2004) regards customer care as a combination of the entire organisation's staff that deals with the differentiated students intended or put strategically in such positions for meeting the highest degree of customer satisfaction. It is the communication between the students and the university and other stakeholders that contribute to customer satisfaction. Customer care has a role to perform in the institution of higher learning like the Zimbabwe Open University, which is an Open and Distance Learning institution. Customer care can be seen as a process which provides time and place utilities for the customer, which involves pre-transaction, transaction and post transaction considerations relating to the exchange process with the customer (Solomon 2010). The provision of quality customer care involves understanding what customers, in this case the student population, expect from those who transact with them (front office staff) and determining how additional value can be added to the service being offered.

The culture of high quality customer care for high degree of customer satisfaction is expected in the modern way of managing and manipulating the sophisticated student populations in the Open and Distance learning. Selden (1998) points out that customer support is made up of a range of customer services to assist the clientele in making cost effective and correct use of the product. There is need for the Open and Distance Learning institutions like the Zimbabwe Open University to make clear plans for customer care. The idea of planning, installation and trouble shooting challenges in customer care must be regarded as prerequisites for the survival of any higher education institution that thrives on the important customer like the students.

Theoretical framework: Recovery theory of customer care

Great customer care is the cornerstone of any Open and Distance Learning institutions' success, (Kathy 2010) in the competitive higher education environment. This study is premised in the basic tenets of the Recovery Theory of Customer care. The theory suggests that a customer who had a bad experience and gets prompt, effective response to their issues will be a more loyal customer than a customer who had no bad experience at all. The hallmark of the research experienced that the students get dissatisfactory service and customer care from the front office staff. Therefore it is imperative for this study to use the Recovery Theory of Customer care as it explains how students can be handled by the front office staff in a way that does not please them.

A customer who starts by getting an unfavorable treatment from the front office staff, when given the right service at the right time will feel honoured and respected. The reason for this is a bad experience provides an organisation the opportunity to demonstrate how valuable the client is. Most institutions of higher learning have some sort of customer care but poor service is common in many institution of higher learning. The main cause of poor customer care and service is a result of lack of training, ineffective performance management and having the wrong people in critical positions to serve the students.

The theory explains that even if the institutions of higher learning have the correct people in correct positions to serve the students there are other times when something goes wrong. No matter how trained the employees are or how technical their system is, there are always chances of employees making mistakes when dealing with the distance learner. It is at these times when a higher education institution in the Open and Distance Learning scenario can take a negative experience and turn into a great experience. Therefore, this is why it is good to have a service recovery place in place in the organisation.

Successful institutions of higher learning have to train employees on what to do in these situations of temptation with student treatment and satisfaction. Where there is a service breakdown, employees are empowered to respond quickly to make good on situations with the client (students). The front office staff should be aware that the deal with students who at times want to figure the system out and try to work it. There are students who would just come to place complaints with the offices for the sake of complaining. Such students need to be dealt with differently from those students who are registering genuine complaints with the office.

Sihua (2009) points out that service failure threatens the existence of customers in the organisation. When the service provider fails to provide the service to the expectations of the customer dissatisfaction is the result and therefore there is need for customer care recovery. The so-called service recovery refers to the recovering reaction made by the service providers to respond to dissatisfaction and complaints of the students caused by service failures and errors (Zhouping et al (2007). Customers have perceptions on the service and care they receive from the service provider such as the front office staff in the Open and Distance Learning scenario. Customer perceived value refers to the customer's overall evaluation of the hallmark service provided at a particular juncture. This is done through weighing the perceived benefits and the cost of getting the service. In

this predicament the Open and Distance Learning institutions should develop selective and reasonable strategies to enhance customers' perceived values. Only in this way, the student may be satisfied with the institutions, gradually form the loyalty (HuYu 2007) to the institution and finally become the most precious resource in the organisation.

Research methodology

The study used a descriptive qualitative design. The questionnaire used had both closed and open-ended sections that yielded qualitative data. Babbie (1997) says, "Descriptive survey is a method of research that describes what we see over and beyond". Thus the researchers chose this method as it allowed students to say exactly what they felt about the customer care by the front office staff in Open and Distance Learning institutions. Borg and Gall (1989) say descriptive surveys are excellent vehicles for the measurement of attitudes and orientations prevalent in a large population as was the case in this study. One of the characteristics of the descriptive survey method is to investigate the present status of the phenomenon. This was the primary goal in this study.

Population of the study

The target population for this study was all the 800 returning students for Masvingo regional campus of the Zimbabwe Open University in 2011 first semester (January to June semester) from all the four faculties.

Sample

A sample of 50 returning students, 30 females and 20 males participated in this study. Convenient sampling technique was used to draw the 50 participants from the four faculties of the university namely, Arts and Education, Commerce and Law, Applied Social Sciences and Science and Technology.

The selected subjects were believed to be knowledgeable about how the front office members of staff handle their issues as they visit the university to receive various services at the Masvingo Regional Campus because they had gone through at least one semester of their studies. Each individual who took part in this research was consulted and agreement was reached on what data to be collected and included in the research. The privacy, anonymity and confidentiality of respondents was upheld and guaranteed in this research.

Data gathering instrument

The study used the questionnaire as the data gathering instrument. The questionnaire was administered to students as they came for registration and other consultations at the regional centre during the period of the start of the first semester of 2011 academic year.

Data gathering procedures

Respondents were asked to fill in the questionnaire on the spot. This method was preferred because it ensured a 100 percent return of the completed questionnaire and it was cheaper and easier to administer, while the processing of data was less complex than could be the case if, say observations were used (Babbie 1997) and (Dumbu and Matanda, 2010).

Data analysis

Data was organised and qualitatively analysed according to issues or themes as raised by the respondents.

Results and discussion

Issues pertaining to customer care by the front office in the Zimbabwe Open University's Masvingo Regional Campus from the view of the heterogeneous student population characterised the responses.

Characteristics of the respondents

Fifty students (n=30 females; n=20 males) completed the questionnaire on the "Front office customer care in Open and Distance Learning, in the eyes of the Zimbabwe Open University students in Masvingo region". These respondents are the people with the mandate of assessing customer care by the front office staff as they give service to the student population in its entirety in the Zimbabwe Open University in Masvingo region.

In the eyes of the students: The idea empathy

Empathy is the platform for effective understanding, communication and relationships. Empathy is essential to develop solutions, win and retain business and avoiding of diffusing conflict.

Empathic listening or empathetic listening

The respondents indicated that the front office should be able to listen to their complaints. Of all the communication skills, listening is arguably the one which makes the biggest difference in dealing with a heterogeneous student population. Mostly people do not listen; they just take turns to speak. It is natural that people tend to be more interested in announcing their own views and experiences than really listening and understanding others. An important issue that was raised by the respondents in this study is the fact that the front office members of staff do not have time to listen to the complaints of the students as they come for service to the university's regional campus centre. They spend most of the time trying to explain to the students what the university expects of them and do not give the students to say out what they have for the university. Some of the respondents have this to say:

- I do not get time to express my problems or challenges connected to my studies as the staff in the accounts and the reception does not pay attention to my problem. They just quickly start to explain to me what I should do for me to get the service but I would want to explain something to them. They seem not to have time to listen to me.

This is ironic since we all like to be listened to and understood. Putting this rightly, when we are understood we feel affirmed and validated. The policy in serving the students is to seek first to understand and then to be understood. This serves as a constant reminder for the need to listen to other person before you can expect them to listen to you. With this students are indicating in this study that they prefer the front office to listen emphatically to their complaints and challenges. This will allow the front office staff to understand and check facts and feelings, usually to the listener's personal agenda. Empathetic listening allows the front office staff to express genuine understanding of the students which hopefully will keep emotions civilised and emotionally under control even for very difficult discussions. This is a chance of bringing elements of neuro-linguistic programming and transactional analysis into exchange and possibly improving the relationship and mutual awareness in terms of the Johari Window concept.

Facilitative listening

On the other level, of listening to the heterogeneous student population with differentiated complaints and challenges the study established that the front office staff should develop the facilitative listening skills. This is listening, understanding fully and fulfilling the students' needs uppermost. Facilitative listening goes beyond even empathic listening because it implies and requires that the front office staff extend an especially helpful approach to the students. Some respondents in this study have the following to say:

- Front office staff does not even bother to assist us where we find difficulties, they simple try to explain and at times the explanation may lack clarity and consistency.
- They fail to interpret our cognisance as an adult speaker
- Front office staff takes the centre stage of being protector or guardian to us as student.

What can be observed from this study is that the front office staffs have to develop the facilitative listening skills. The front office staff should exercise caution when listening to the diversified student population. This is vital if because the front office staff are in a position of responsibility or influence towards the students. Facilitative listening requires you to have thought and prepared very carefully about what you will ask and how you will respond, even if you pause and prepare your responses during a transaction with the students. Remember that many students may fail to express themselves adequately. The front office staff should become interested in helping such students. There is a suggestion of transcendence and self actualisation as described in Maslow's Hierarchy of needs theory, within the facilitative listening. Front office should be devoid of selfish personal motive other than to extend help. The study has shown that the students' interests are at the forefront. Facilitative listening is not an age or money-related capability but is simply an attitude of mind that helps front office deal with student of diversity.

Front office lacking support or understanding of the students (customers)

It emerged from the study that the front office lack support and understanding of the student challenges and queries they submit to them. It can be argued that quality and level of customer service is decreasing increasingly at the front office that the students feel that the service to them is decaying at an alarming rate. This is mainly attributed to lack of understating and supporting the client to the fullest extent. The front office does not have a clear customer service policy in place. The following excerpts bear testimony to this:

- The staff members at the reception and accounts are not supportive when it comes to registration and accessing the results for the semester.
- They even do not understand my plight with regards to me having left the receipts to show that I am a paid up student. They could simply check in their records fast and friendly other than to wait for me to have another trip to home and back to the campus for service.

- They are not worried about how I should register and complete the scanner sheet.

It is imperative for the staff to understand and support the students in course of their service receipt at the front office. Receiving service and showing good customer by the front office will always yield positive results in the competitive higher education environment. The Zimbabwe Open University will reap an extra mile in attracting the students and retain them.

Lack of instant feedback

It was the contention of respondents in this study that the front office members of staff do not provide instant feedback even on simple issues that does not require consultation with their bosses. One way of communication without provision for feedback indicates ineffective communication. Lack of communication is a detrimental issue in customer care and retention by an organisation. One respondent put forth the following argument:

- The people at the front office do not provide us with feedback instantly. Some of the information which we might need may end up not provided for by the front office staff in the reception and the accounts department. The feedback rate is just slow and not matching the standards we expect from the staff.

From the above excerpts it is indicative that that it is essential to encourage instant feedback to allow flow of information from the front office staff to the students and vice versa. Direct and indirect feedbacks are essential elements of communication between the students and the front office staff to avoid misunderstandings in the process of serviced delivery. This will definitely take the university a long way in championing good customer care at the regional campus.

The study also established that the front office staff lack the knowledge of the perceived values of the students they offer the service on a daily basis. Students have indicated that they have perceived values which are closely related to the quality of service. The quality of service is closely related to the customer perceived value. During the service recovery in the competitive higher education environment the Zimbabwe Open University's Masvingo regional campus should thrive to understand and take cognisance of the customer perceive values. One of the respondents in this study retorts the following:

- The front office staff members do not value what we value whenever we come for services at the regional office. They seem not to be understanding that time is more important than any other asset when it comes to our studies.

What this implies is that the front office staff members has to use time cautiously when serving the students. It is imperative to point out that the non monetary factors, among various factors related to perceived sacrifice, often occupy a decisive position in the mind set of the student not to chose service from a competitor. In life many customers believe and consider time as an important asset than money because once lost it may not be recovered again.

It is indicative in this study that the front office staff fails to attach importance to the demands and expectations of the students which are capable of meeting the core benefits and demands of the students. The following excerpts bear the testimony:

- There is no complaint desk for the students to register their complaints
- The suggestion box is a mere stooge that contains rubbish paper because our complaints have never been attended to.
- We even do not know how to lodge a complaint at the region and the front line members of staff seems not to be sure where we can register our complaints.

Conclusions and Recommendations

The study concluded that front office staff act as frontline marketing team of the region, develop facilitative listening skills and understand challenges and queries of the students. The study recommended that the Regional Campus employ the automated customer service, implement feedback loops that allow the capture of feedback from students at the point of service, adopt the policy of 'Feel Good Factor' and front office should have empathy with students. It also recommended that front office staff receive in house training on customer care.

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