

# Quality Customer Service as a Competitive Advantage in the Telecommunication Industry in the Western Region of Ghana

Johnson Yeboah\* George Dominic Ewur

Lecturer, (Marketing Department) – Takoradi Polytechnic Business School, Box 256, Takoradi, Ghana

\*gastybg@yahoo.com

## Abstract

The rise and fall of many organizations in Ghana in recent years calls for an evaluation of reasons given in many research works. The paper presents such evaluation of reasons presented in many literatures which are popular, linking it to organizations such as Telecommunication Companies which are struggling to survive competition in Ghana. Many writers have attributed the problems with different factors. After many years of looking in to the problem, the researchers have come out with their own conclusions which are regarded as the real issue.

The paper analyses the evidence obtained from the survey of the customers. It seeks to explain why quality customer service plays a major role for the survival of many of the telecommunication companies drawing upon the evidence from the previous literatures. Based on the literature review and a pilot study, many customer requirements and features were identified and were used to determine the level of service quality.

Thus, the closing chapter deals with the summary of the major findings, recommendations and conclusions. The eligibility criteria for the conclusion are the sample of those respondents of the telecommunication companies in the Western Region of Ghana.

**Keywords:** Quality Customer Service, Competitive Advantage, Telecommunication Companies, Western Region, Ghana.

## 1.0. Introduction

Intense competition in the business world today has led to many companies finding diverse ways of overcoming their competitors. Consequently, many organizations in recent years are placing more emphasis on quality customer care as means of attracting new customers as well as retaining the existing ones. Thus, quality customer care is now a major avenue for sustainable competition.

As Gregory (2000), put it, “the issue of customer service has attracted more attention in recent years than ever before, with a big influence being the sensitivity on behalf of the customer”. It is only when the needs and wants of the customer is identified and fulfilled that could bring about a greater success of an organization. Many organizations, especially, in the developing countries have come to realize the need to adhere to the concept as means of competitive advantage in order to guarantee their long survival in the ever changing social and economic environment.

The growth of the telecommunication industry in Ghana is mainly based on factors such as quality, availability, affordability etc. The quality of the system especially, has been a major setback in many countries in recent years. These problems are not uncommon in many African countries, especially in Ghana. In some parts of the country, the telephone network is not available and where it is available, the standard of service is very poor, which calls for much concern.

There is no doubt that future growth of economies lies mainly on the development of information system where information would be exchanged through the use of telephone networks. However, the quality standard of the information infrastructures in Ghana could lead to the region lagging behind the developed countries. The researcher sort to look in to the activities of the telecommunication companies at the Takoradi Municipality in the Western Region of Ghana and proposes a way forward for the years ahead.

In many of these organizations today, there are considerable wide gaps between the recognition of the importance of quality customer service and the actual service rendered to customers. The management inability to recognize a specific concept that will seek to reflect the organizational culture and the effective customer care strategy prevent many companies from gaining true understanding of how well their services meet customers' expectation.

While many of them have done well in providing better services and have developed a foundation for a long-term success, there are still signs that majority of them are still seriously striving to implement policies that seek to improve issues in successful business strategy. As a result of lack of better customer service, many of them are not able to survive competition. Many customers are not happy about the kind of service they received and others suffer not only from discourtesy but also from gross misconduct and all kinds of behaviour from the employees. This has resulted in a gradual and sometimes dramatic loss of sales and revenue.

The industry is one of the prime support services needed for the rapid growth of any developing country. The service providers are of paramount importance to both developed and emerging economies. In Ghana, the industry is projected to contribute greatly to the national goal of achieving status as a middle income nation by

the year 2020. With stiff competition, customer satisfaction is a necessity for survival in the market, at the same time Ghanaians are becoming equipped with necessary knowledge about quality service delivery. Many telecommunication service providers in Ghana offer various products and services in the market, and compete with each other to ensure optimal customer satisfaction in terms of products or services. Quality is generally regarded as being a key factor in the creation of worth and in influencing customer satisfaction.

To provide improved quality service, the companies need to investigate degree of customers' sensitivity and expectations toward service quality. Armed with such information, telecommunication outfits are then able to strategically focus service quality objectives and procedures to fit the Ghanaian market.

### 1.1 Research Objectives

The research study therefore set out:

1. To assess the extent to which quality customer service serves as a competitive tool for the Telecommunication industry in the Western Region of Ghana
2. To evaluate the perception of the customers concerning the level of service quality within the industry in the community
3. To evaluate the effectiveness of customer care strategy and its impact on customer attraction and retention in the communication industry in the region

### 1.2 Problem Statement

In recent years, the market has grown very fast, and many alternatives are opened to the consumers. In a competitive economy like Ghana, in the recent years, the concept of quality service plays a very important role that, the management cannot ignore. Although, the relative importance of quality customer service varies, the most important thing is that, the majority of the consumers are satisfied who will in turn transfer the message to attract others to the firm. Without a well-defined concept, the image of the company is completely undermined. There is therefore the need for intensification of effort which could help to increase patronage as well as sales and profit.

### 1.3 Research Questions

- Can quality customer service serves as a competitive advantage for Telecommunication Companies in the region?
- Can the company's relationship with its customers have any impact on its profitability and its long-term sustainability?
- Are there any established linkages between the vision of the companies and their customer care strategy?
- Is there a significant relationship between customer satisfaction and the service quality dimensions?

## 2.0 Literature Review

### 2.1 Introduction

A shift is taking place from marketing to anonymous masses of customers to developing and managing relationships with more or less well known or at least some identified customers Gronroos, (1994). This section provides general literature on quality customer service and its link with customer satisfaction, customer loyalty and business performance.

### 2.2 Customer Service

A service is seen as a contribution to the interest or well-being of others, Webster's II, (1999). According to Harris (2000, p.32), "customer service is anything we do for the customer that enhances the customer experience". Customer service is also said to be a relationship with people who are essential to anything you do; meeting the needs and expectations of the customer as defined by the customer and used to create a mutually beneficial relationship between itself and those it serves Zemke & Woods, (1998). Drucker (1954), stated that, the only reason for business to be in business is to innovate and satisfy customers at a profit. Customers are satisfied when their expectations are met, and these expectations are built by advertising, prior experiences, personal needs, word of mouth, Parasuraman, Zeithaml & Berry, (1985).

Leonard L. Berry and A. Parasuraman (1991) showed that inspired leadership, a customer-minded corporate culture, excellent service-system design and efficient use of information and technology are crucial for achieving superior service quality and service marketing. They argued that superior quality is vital to sustaining success. They insisted that customer satisfaction through integration of service quality throughout the system must be the focus of any company.

### 2.3 Quality service

The word 'quality' is a difficult and elusive term to define, since it has a wide variety of meanings and connotations to different people. The confusion over the numerous interpretations and perspectives of 'quality' is particularly pronounced in the service sector Galloway, (1996) due to characteristics which tend to differentiate services from goods.

One common definition of service quality is the extent to which a service meets customers' needs or expectations Lewis & Mitchell, (1990); Dotchin & Oakland, (1994a); Asubonteng et al., (1996). Harvey &

Knight (1996), suggested that quality can be broken into five related dimensions: quality as exceptional (e.g. high standards), quality as consistency (e.g. zero defects), quality as fitness for purpose (fitting customer specifications), quality as value for money, and quality as Transformative (an ongoing process that includes empowerment and enhancement of the customer satisfaction). Traditionally, external stakeholders have been associated with quality assurance procedures (Nina Becket and Maureen Brookes). Quality assurance refers to the 'planned and systematic action, deemed as necessary to provide adequate confidence that a product or service will satisfy given requirement for quality' Borahan & Ziarati; (2002, p. 914).

Quality has been measured in different point of views by many researchers. Some find quality measurement fragmented and difficult to understand. Hibbard and Jewett, after their comprehensive study of the consumers found that, consumers with differing access to an experience with care, show different levels of comprehension. According to them, consumers understand indicators poorly and interpret them in unintended ways. Others make assumptions about quality indicators and how they are understood by the consumers.

Aristotle, in his reflection on the deep logical structures and categories of reality, has identified quality as the third of his well-known nine categories: substance, quantity, quality, relation, place, date, posture, possession, action, passivity, (cf. Aristotle, *Kategoria*). For Aristotle, a quality is "that in virtue of which things are said to be qualified somehow" (*Kategoria*). He distinguished between quality as states or conditions, quality as virtue (natural capacity or incapacity), quality as affections (e.g. sweetness, bitterness, hotness, coldness, paleness, etc) and quality as shape or external form of a thing (e.g. straightness, curvedness, etc), Jan Botha,(2000).

The first researcher to define service quality is by Gronroos (1983) who distinguished between technical quality (what is done) and functional quality (how it is done). His work was later expanded by Parasuraman, Zeithaml & Berry (1985:42).

Service quality is a measure of the degree to which customer expectations matches the experience of the service delivered Lewis, (1990). This awareness leads to an emotional reaction that is obvious in the satisfaction or dissatisfaction of the product or services being purchased Woodruff et al; (1983). The International Telecommunication Union (ITU-T) defines quality of service as "the collective effort of service performance which determines the degree of satisfaction of user of all the services".

Quality and satisfaction are two related terms which are used interchangeably by some researchers. Parasuraman argued that service quality is similar in nature to an attitude. He explains that, quality is related but not equivalent to satisfaction.

Berry & Parasuraman, (1992), observed that, manufacturing executives looked for a multi-faceted approach to quality which is focused on improvements that would count to consumers. They noticed that, their attention is overall interaction between the corporations, its dealerships, and those it served, and not just improving the quality of the product.

American Management Association(AMA) survey of North America, Western Europe and Japanese managers, shows 78 percent of the sample indicated that, improving quality and services to customers is the key to competitive success Berry & Parasuraman, (1992). Therefore, to fulfill the expectations of the customers means to deliver the quality of service that provides the totality of satisfaction to the customers. The value that the customers obtain from an organization leads to the loyalty and trustworthiness to that organization.

The concept of quality as viewed by Kotler (1994) is the totality of features and characteristics of a product or service that bear on its ability to satisfy stated or implied need. Quality is therefore the key to value creation and customer satisfaction.

Robinson (1999) defines quality service as "an attitude or global judgment about the superiority of a service". That is, an attitude that will provide distinct competitive advantage. An effective service quality evaluation identifies ways to improve an organization's performance.

The "Gap Model" of perceived service quality was developed by Parasuraman, Zeithaml and Berry (1985). According to this model, there are five gaps of service quality.

- i. the gap between management perceptions of consumer's expectation and expected service
- ii. the gap between management perceptions of consumer's expectation and the translation of perceptions in to quality specification,
- iii. the gap between the translations of perceptions of service quality specification and service delivery,
- iv. the gap between service delivery and external communications to consumers and
- v. The gap between the customers expected level of service and the actual service performance.

Other literatures reveal how insensitivity some organizations are, towards their customers. According to Sarah Cook (2000), in many organisations, a customer is seen as "bloody nuisance". She suggested that, by actively listening to customers companies could save rather than expend money. The 1-10-100 rules illustrate this point. The rule states that, for every pound that a company spends on preventing a quality problem, it will spend ten to inspect and correct the mistake after it occurs. In the worst case, if the quality failure goes unanswered, or unnoticed until after the customer has taken delivery, it will take 100 times to regain the initial amount and to regain the confidence of the customer, Sarah Cook, (2000). For Porter, competitive strategy must grow out of a

sophisticated understanding of the rules of competition that determines an industry's attractiveness. "The ultimate aim of competitive strategy is to cope with and, ideally, to change those rules in the firm's behaviour" Porter, (1985, p4).

It is therefore important to update the knowledge and skills of employees to make them more proactive and abreast with current happenings in the dynamic market place in order to sustain increasing competition. Porter stated three conditions for sustaining competitive advantage.

a) "Hierarchy of Source ( durability and imitability) - lower-order advantages such as low labour cost may be easily imitated, while higher order advantages like proprietary technology, brand reputation, or customer relationships require sustain and cumulative investment and are more difficult to imitate.

b) Number of distinct Sources - the larger the sources, the higher it is to imitate, the smaller it is the lower to do so.

c) Constant Improvement and upgrading - must be "running scared", creating new advantage at least as fast as competitors replicate the old ones".

#### 2.4 Customer satisfaction, loyalty and business performance

The rationale for Customer Relation Management is that it improves business performance by enhancing customer satisfaction and driving up customer loyalty. Satisfaction increases because customer insight allows companies to understand their customers better, and create improved customer value propositions. As customer satisfaction rises, so does customer repurchase intention, Anderson, (1994). This in turn influences actual purchasing behaviour, which has a significant impact on business performance.

Customer satisfaction has been the subject of considerable research and has been defined and measured in various ways Oliver, (1997). Customer satisfaction may be defined as the customer's fulfillment response to a consumption experience, or some part of it. Customer satisfaction is a pleasurable fulfillment response while dissatisfaction is an un-pleasurable one Buttle,( 2004). Satisfaction and dissatisfaction are two ends of a continuum, where the location is defined by a comparison between expectations and outcome. Customers would be satisfied if the outcome of the service meets expectations. When the service quality exceeds the expectations, the service provider has won a delighted customer. Dissatisfaction will occur when the perceived overall service quality does not meet expectations Looy, Gemmel & Dierdonck,( 2003). Sometimes customer's expectations are met, yet the customer is not satisfied. This occurs when the expectations are low Buttle,( 2005). For example, the customer expects the flight to be late and it gets late.

Customer satisfaction is considered to be one of the most important outcomes of all marketing activities in a market-oriented firm. The obvious need for satisfying the firm's customer is to expand the business, to gain a higher market share, and to acquire repeat and referral business, all of which lead to improved profitability Barsky, (1992). Studies conducted by Cronin and Taylor (1992) in service sectors such as: banking, pest control, dry cleaning, and fast food; found that customer satisfaction has a significant effect on purchase intentions in all four sectors. Similarly, in the health-care sector, McAlexander *et al.* (1994) found that patient satisfaction and service quality have a significant effect on future purchase intentions, Kandampully & Suhartanto,( 2000)

#### 2.5 Customer Loyalty

Customer loyalty can be defines as "*customer behavior characterized by a positive buying pattern during an extended period (measured by means of repeat purchase, frequency of purchase, wallet share or other indicators) and driven by a positive attitude towards the company and its products or services*" Looy, Gemmel & Dierdonck, ( 2003).

Practitioners and researchers have not clearly identified a theoretical framework, identifying factors that could lead to the development of customer loyalty Gremler & Brown, (1997). However, there is a consensus amongst practitioners and academics that customer satisfaction and service quality are prerequisites of loyalty Gremler and Brown, (1997; Cronin and Taylor, (1992). Those technical, economical and psychological factors that influence customers to switch suppliers are considered to be additional prerequisites of loyalty Selnes, 1993; Gremler and Brown, (1997). Recent studies also indicate that the firm's image may influence customer enthusiasm: value, delight, and loyalty Bhote, (1996), Kandampully and Suhartanto, (2000)

Loyalty behaviors, including relationship continuance, increased scale or scope of relationship, and recommendation (word of mouth advertising) result from customers' beliefs that the quantity of value received from one supplier is greater than that available from other suppliers. Loyalty, in one or more of the forms noted above, creates increased profit through enhanced revenues, reduced costs to acquire customers, lower customer-price sensitivity, and decreased costs to serve customers familiar with a firm's service delivery system Reicheld and Sasser, (1990). Yi's "Critical review of customer satisfaction" (1990) concludes, "Many studies found that customer satisfaction influences purchase intentions as well as post-purchase attitude" (p. 104).

Customer loyalty can be viewed in two distinct ways Jacoby and Kyner, (1973). The first views loyalty as an attitude. Different feelings create an individual's overall attachment to a product, service, or organization Fornier, (1994). These feelings define the individual's (purely cognitive) degree of loyalty. The second view of loyalty is behavioural. Examples of loyalty behaviour include continuing to purchase services from the same

supplier, increasing the scale and or scope of a relationship, or the act of recommendation Yi, (1990).

The behavioural view of loyalty is similar to loyalty as defined in the service management literature. In brief, there are two dimensions to customer loyalty: behavioural and attitudinal Julander *et al.*, (1997). The behaviour dimension refers to a customer's behaviour on repeat purchases, indicating a preference for a brand or a service over time Bowen and Shoemaker, (1998). Attitudinal dimensions, on the other hand, refer to a customer's intention to repurchase and recommend, which are good indicators of a loyal customer Getty and Thompson, (1994).

Moreover, a customer who has the intention to repurchase and recommend is very likely to remain with the company, Kandampully & Suhartanto, (2000) and Hallowell, (1996). Customer attitude being difficult to measure, for financial and practical purposes, customer retention is widely used as an indicator of customer loyalty. Researchers have combined both views into comprehensive models of customer loyalty. Dick and Basu (1994) came up with a two-dimensional model of customer loyalty identifying four forms of loyalty according to relative attitudinal strength and repeat purchase behavior. The true loyal are those who have high levels of repeat purchase behavior and a strong relative attitude. Spuriously loyal customers tend to be more motivated by impulse, convenience and habit i.e. if the conditions are right. Latent loyalty applies to those customers who are loyal simply because they have no other choice. Lastly, there will always be some customers who shall not be loyal to any particular brand.

### 2.6 Sustaining Competitive Advantage

The long-term success and survival of every firm is fundamentally based on the sustainable competitive advantage. As Varadarajan and Jayachandran (1999) put it, 'understanding which resources and firm behaviours lead to a sustainable competitive advantage is considered to be a fundamental issue in marketing strategy.

According to Barney (1991), competitive advantage is sustained when other firms are unable to duplicate the benefits of one's strategy. Thus, a competitive advantage can result either from implementing a value-creating strategy not simultaneously being employed by current or prospective competitors or through superior execution of the same strategy as competitors

Bharadwaji, Varadarajan, & Fahy, (1993). Hay & Williamson (1991:42), defines competitive advantage as 'deceptively simple idea of assessing a company's capabilities and market position by how they give it advantage relative to competitors'. According to them, competitive advantages are ephemeral and only worth as much as the value that the market places on them Jeremy Klein, (2001). "A firm experiences competitive advantages when its actions in an industry or market create economic value when few competing firms are engaging in similar actions" Barney, (2002:9)

### 2.7 Significant of the study

It is hoped that the findings of this research will contribute to knowledge and therefore provide a background for academic studies on customer service in Ghana. Thus it is hoped that the findings will enrich and strengthen the store of knowledge that already exist in academic circles about customer service. The study will be essential to all the telecommunication companies in the region and their competitors as the findings and recommendations will help them fully assess the impact or effectiveness of their customer service programmes.

## 3.0 Methodology

The chapter explains the research design and method the researchers employed that most appropriately helped in the collection of data for the study. As stated by Miles and Huberman (1984), knowing what you want to find out leads in exorable to the question of how you will get that information, guided the researcher in selecting the methods for the research.

Silverman (2000 p.79) defines methodology as how one will go about studying a phenomenon. According to Mason, methodology is a general approach to studying research topics while methods are specific research techniques. He argued that, the choice of method should reflect an "overall research strategy" as your methodology shapes which methods are used and how each method is used Mason, (1996:19). The researchers, decided in this research study to use the qualitative method in order to produce a valuable conclusion. In the light of this, an assessment is made on the data collected from the Telecommunication companies to ascertain the extent to which the concept of quality is applied to its customer service department.

As far as quality of service is concerned, from the point of view of consumers, analysis is carried out using a simple frequency analysis of the findings and the total presented as the percentage of the entire sample population. To give a better picture of the situation, books, articles as well as periodicals were consulted to help the researcher make better recommendations of the situation under research. After a successful research in to the problem and other activities, generalization of the results was made to other organizations to give a true representation of the impact of the quality customer service.

### 3.1 Research approach

A sample of about 150 respondents were chosen and investigated for the purpose of the study. Out of these, only 132 questionnaires were retrieved. In order to seek the view of the customers, questionnaires were given out to

evaluate the perception of customers with regard to the extent to which the company's customer servicing influence their decision. The method for conducting the research was based on the perception of the participating customers, hence the likelihood for data inaccuracies due to misinterpretations. Since the research is restricted to a particular municipality, the generality of the finding was considered carefully.

Due to financial constraints, the principle of convenient sampling technique where individual customers are selected randomly to form the sample for the study was applied. The disadvantage here is that it was difficult to get a very accurate sample frame, and that might have resulted in the researcher being biased. However, efforts were put in to minimize that problem.

To ensure absolute control on the collection of the data, the research was based partly on secondary source and also gathering the information from the customers and to ensure a genuine interpretation. Sources such as journals, magazines and textbooks were also used as source for this study.

Some specific items in the SERVQUEL method of measuring quality were used. The technique was propounded by Zeithaml, A. Parasursman, Leonard and Berry. The method takes in to account, the perception of the customers of the relative important of service attributes. According to Paul Fedoroff, the methodology was based on 5 dimensions, which are;

1. Tangibles - appearance of physical facilities, equipment, personnel and communication materials.
2. Reliability - ability to perform the promised service dependably and accurately.
3. Responsiveness - willingness to help customers and provide prompt service.
4. Assurance - knowledge and courtesy of employees and their ability to convey trust and confidence.
5. Empathy - does the firm provide care to its customers?

By using this measurement, the companies will be able to assess the gap between the desired of their customers and the actual performance of the company.

Also data from the telecommunication companies about their current operations with regard to customer service is used. Online databases such as the company's website as well as market reports were also made useful. Some depth interviews with officials of some of the companies were made to ascertain the current customer strategy and to identify the gap.

There was a problem with regard to the collection of information as envisaged since the personnel of the companies were reluctant in releasing information required purely for academic purpose. However, the possible down- to- earth investigation couple with the fact that primary source was also used made the limitation negligible. Some specific people were identified to conduct an indirect investigation in to specific administrative areas where the researcher was not given access.

### 3.2 Data collection

As mentioned earlier, a sample of one-hundred and fifty (150) respondents were made up of one hundred (100) businessmen and women from the city of Takoradi, and the remaining, (50) were made up of other public organizations, institutions and individuals. Ten students including lecturers were selected randomly from Takoradi Polytechnic for interview to seek their views.

After designing the questionnaires, they were sent out to the respondents to seek their views and perception about the quality of service they receive from the industry, and the extent to which that service influence their attitude towards the companies. Questionnaires are research tools through which people are asked to respond to the same set of questions in predetermined order. It is used to seek an in-depth opinions and perspectives of the respondents Gray, (2004:187). According to Ackroyd and Hughes (1992: 100), questionnaires are used without an interviewer, the respondent complete the questionnaires without any assistance other than the guidance provided by the written instructions on the questionnaire itself.

It is also intended to elicit information from respondents who sometimes express their attitude or an opinion on issues, which may be used as a supplement to other information already gathered.

It was useful administering questionnaires as they are economical, in that, a considerable amount of research data were collected for a relatively low cost in terms of materials, money and time, and standardized answers are supplied as posited by Descombe (1998: 105). Robson (2002), argued that, questionnaires are prepared in such a manner that as many people as possible responded at the same time and to the same questions. This method saved time and money and was easily understood by the respondents who easily filled the answers themselves.

However, according to Descombe, pre-coded questions can be frustrating for respondents and thus, deter them from answering and can also be bias towards the researcher's rather than the respondent's way of seeing things. Questionnaire also gives little opportunity for the researcher to check the truthfulness of the answers given by the respondents. According to Gillham (2000: p.11), misunderstandings in questionnaires cannot be corrected and there is low response rate which can be a salutary experience for the novice researcher.

The researchers were able to retrieve all the ten questionnaires sent to Takoradi Polytechnic, however, those sent to the key workers at the various companies including; MTN Company, Tigo Communication Company, AirTel and Vodafon Companies were not all answered.

As stated, the analysis was done by using a simple frequency analysis of the finding and the totals presented as

the percentage of the entire population. For the purpose of fairness, some towns and villages were also visited by some delegates who decided to help in my investigation. Due to lack of finance and time constraints, the principle used was convenience sampling techniques to identify a cluster of respondents from the city. The approach helped in maximizing the representative of the sample in relation to the population.

Interviews were conducted, some face to face, and others, through telephone. The purpose was to clarify the thinking of the researcher and to get more insight in to how those who could not get the questionnaires also think about the quality of service provided to them by the companies, and to get a broad measurement of quality of service in the survey.

Ackroyd and Hughs (1992: 100), regard interviews as encounters between a researcher and a respondent in which an individual is asked a series of questions relevant to the subject of the research. They further intimate that, the foundation of interviewing lies in the mundane observations that individuals can report on what they feel, are, have, tell others about their lives, disclose what their hopes and fears are, offer their opinions, state what they believe in, say, what they did last week, how much they spent on food, who they see regularly, and so on; they can impact masses of information about themselves.

The research exercise involved interviewing some key workers of the companies. The purpose was to get in-depth information about the study as interview lends itself to being used alongside other methods as a way of supplementing other data-adding detail and depth. The semi-structured type of interviews were used which allowed respondents to expatiate on issues but where the researcher kept the flow going by asking relevant questions on his lists of topics, the answers were open-ended and there was more emphasis on the interviewee elaborating points of interest.

There were some setbacks in this approach and the research might not be an accurate sample frame, however, because fair representatives were involved, and the confidence among the customers was higher, it can be said in confident that, the out-come was the true reflection of what is going on.

The research involved mostly about how to analysis the results. Qualitative method might bring about different views, therefore fairness was very important. Philips (1997) stresses on the obligation of fairness. According to him, fairness arises when individuals and groups of individuals interact for mutual benefit. And since the research study was to benefit the society as a whole, there was the need for a fair and accurate interpretation of the findings that could contribute towards an effective implementation of policies that would be of the interest of the society.

It must be noted however, that the telecommunication industry employs huge number of the population in Ghana, for that matter, it was the researcher's responsibility to do this area of research explicitly to review the loopholes that could lead to the collapse of the industry, there by leaving many people unemployed.

Since the implication of the research was for an organization to seek to provide a healthy service for customer satisfaction and also for the organization to benefit from economic success, it was important not to exaggerate the report that could lead to conflict of interest.

Since the research also seek to view the management attitude and philosophy towards internal customers as well as the external customers, there is the possibility of managers being biased, therefore, the researcher prevented the cultivation of lengthy report that could underestimate the validity of the research study.

### 3.3 Data Analysis

The researchers begun by assessing various locations that are mostly connected with the telecommunication networks. In Sekondi Takoradi, the Western Regional capital city of Ghana, questionnaires were administered to both business and the private users of the services. There were mixed reactions as well as consistencies at various levels. Majority of customers shared similar views with regard to quality of service. However, those who carry out businesses were very much worried about unreliability of the companies. This couple with the attitude of the staff of the various companies leads much to be desired. Apart from lack of technical skills, their responsiveness was far below expectation as observed.

Many businessmen and women have realized that, the networks are not more reliable. They complained about frequent break-down of the network and the management insensitivity towards its repairs. Some traders were not satisfied about the way they keep on losing their customers because they cannot communicate with them frequently. This has been going on for a longer period of time, without any proper solution.

The researchers also discovered lots of inefficiencies. For instance, customers are sometimes being charged with calls they have never made. In the cause of interviews it was revealed that, some customers' bills had been charged wrongly in their names. According to them, when they contacted offices, they were told, there is nothing that some of the companies could do about it.

**Presentation and analysis:**

Table 3.1: Gender distribution of questionnaire to respondents

Sex	Frequency	Percentage %
Male	52	39%
Female	80	61%
Total	132	100%

Source: Survey data (2014)

Table above shows the sex distribution of the respondents of the researchers' questionnaires. This indicates that male respondents were 52 (39%), while female respondent were 80 (61%). This implies that there are more female respondents than male respondents. Out of one hundred and fifty (150) questionnaires distributed only 132 were retrieved.

The researchers speculated that women consider their mobile phone the most important device in their life compared to men. Women cannot imagine life without it, and most of them look at it first in the morning, and majority of them carry it with them wherever they go. Women also use their mobile phone for social media, for texting, and for shopping as speculated, by the researchers more than men.

Table 3.2: Occupation of respondents

OCCUPATION	FREQUENCY	PERCENTAGE %
BUSINESSMEN/WOMEN	50	38%
GOVERNMENT INSTITUTION	27	20%
STUDENTS/INDIVIDUAL	55	42%
TOTAL	132	100%

Source: Survey data (2014)

The above table indicates the occupation of the respondents. 38% represent businessmen and women, 20% were those who work at the governmental institutions while 42% were students and private individuals above eighteen (18) years of age.

The findings reviewed some factors which affect the customers' decision of purchase. Those factors include reliability, which the company has failed to maintain to its customers, quality of call completion, which makes it impossible for users to reach their targeted destination, and to receive from those destinations. The other area worth of mentioning is the poor system of billing. Bills are frequently sent to wrong customers due to inefficiencies. Many customers are confused, because they do not understand how they are billed. Other factors include the level of responsiveness and empathy.

The table shown below indicates those factors that mainly influence the customers' decision of purchase;

Table 3.3 Respondents were asked about the factors that mainly influence their decision for purchase

Factors	Frequency	Percentage%
Coverage	52	39%
Reliability	30	23%
Responsiveness	27	21%
Place	23	17%
Total	132	100%

The table above demonstrates the extent to which quality influences consumers' decisions of purchase. The elements used in measuring quality for the purpose of this study includes; coverage, reliability, responsiveness, and price. Out of the 150 questionnaires sent, 132 were retrieved, 39% indicated that coverage was important to them, 23% was more concerned with reliability, and 21% touched on responsiveness whereas 17% placed emphasis on price as a measure of quality.

The relevant issue here is that, irrespective of how insignificant any of the factors are, the finding reveals some loopholes which when managed successfully, would together contribute towards an improved system in the industry as whole.

Table 3.4 Respondents were asked the level of service quality by the Telecommunication companies in the region (Servquel measurement of customers' perception of quality of service)

Factors	Frequency	Percentage %
Reliability	20	15%
Responsiveness	30	23%
Assurance	18	14%
Tangibility	48	36%
Empathy	16	12%
Total	132	100%

From the table, it appears that only 15% of the respondents think the companies are reliable, thus, the ability to

perform the promised service dependably and accurately. With the appearance of the physical facilities, personnel and equipment, about 36% of the respondents are influenced and attracted by it. Tangibles involve the appearance of physical facilities, including the equipment, personnel, and communication materials. However, the research conducted also indicates that, most people are worried about the empathy. Empathy involves the provision of caring, individualized attention to customers. This empathy includes access, communication, and understanding the customer. Most customers prefer good service to lower prices. Think about all the situations where you are prepared to pay a little extra to get a better or more efficient service. Only 12% think the companies care about their needs and wants which might have been another factor accounted for the reduction of customers. 23% think the companies are willing and able to serve them promptly. This analysis reveals a lower standard of quality of service provided by Telecommunication Companies in the region, which is far below the standard set by The Independent Commission for World Telecommunication and the International Telecommunication Union (ITU).

#### **4.0 Findings, Conclusions and Recommendations**

The researchers identified how unsatisfied the majority of the consumers are, with regard to high cost of connection and registration. They complained about long delay for customer registration. In Sekondi Takoradi, the Regional capital, many of them were concerned about serviceability, high billing charges and reliability. Only a few number of the chosen sample in the city were satisfied with the lengthy installation time and delay in fixing a problem. It was observed that, it is not just the prices that matters to the consumers, but the quality and the reliability of the network.

However, in the surrounding villages, only few of them have access to the telephone networks. These networks are mainly MTN, Vodafon, Airtel, Tigo and Glo networks. The other competitors have not reached that far.

There were mixed responses to the questionnaires administered there. Many of the respondents felt prestige of having a mobile phone or telephone services in their homes and never bothers to talk about their servicing. However, those who answered the questionnaires were basically concerned about the price. The level of price sensitivity was very high in the rural areas since majority of them are poor farmers. The subscription fees as well as the usage fees on call volume and timing seemed very expensive. There were complaints about the coverage. Those we interviewed on that issue explained that, their families and friends find it difficult to reach them, especially, when they call from abroad.

They were much worried about the telecommunication infrastructures and expressed their belief that the industry will put in every effort needed to solve that problem. In the end, the researchers deduced from the finding that, almost all the respondents recognize the usefulness of telecommunication network to their social and economic development. However, those assigned with the responsibilities of providing them have not put in much effort to improve upon it. They are only interested in the short term development, and not bothering about aspirations of their customers.

The next step of our research was to interact with the staff of the companies. The purpose was to establish their approach to customer care strategy. Probing the mission statement and the vision of the companies brought to light that they were in consonance with many writers of quality customer service as reviewed in the literature. In an interview with some of the executives, a brief summary of the core value of these companies were obtained. They described their culture as being responsive to the market and sensitive to customers.

To get a broader picture and understanding, some key workers were interviewed. Some were not willing to release some relevant information for academic purpose because of the fears that, they might lose their jobs. However, about 90% of the information received was consistent. The questions were basically on the satisfaction of the workers that motivate them to improve upon their services to the customers.

It was found that, some employees were not customer focused and practiced what they believed in. They complained about the bureaucratic nature of the companies, and how decision making was centralized. Majority of them hinted on the poor salary which is far below their contribution to the companies. It was observed that, the management insensitivity to their employees plays a major role towards poor customer servicing because the workers are not encouraged to contribute to that effort. Some issues including; an increase in operating costs due to inflation, reduction in business volume and high maintenance cost of old and obsolete equipment were raised by management as the reasons for the cause of poor quality customer service. Thus, the inability to satisfy employees' results to the failure of the organizations' ambitions towards their customers. It was revealed that, the attitude of the workers as well as poor relationship with employees had direct effect on their customers, competition and profits.

The researchers discovered that almost all the companies have set out quality customer service as their central focus; however, the managerial flaws as well as bad implementation of policies have resulted to the failure of the realization of the concept.

##### **4.1 Conclusion**

The research was aimed at examining how quality customer service plays an important role to a sustainable

competitive advantage in the telecommunication companies in the Western Region of Ghana. The study is an evident of the fact that the concept of quality of service, even though not an end to competition, contributes immensely for the survival of every firm.

The research reveals an overly importance of the companies to improve upon quality customer service if they are to achieve and maintain sustainable competitive advantage through the building of customer trust and confidence. As stated by Jarillo (1988), the establishment of trust and perceived goal congruence are two factors that assist in the development of organizational networks. He suggested that, trust is an essential element to maintaining both effectiveness and efficiency in network relationship.

The comparison between the customer responses and employee responses showed that, in creating superior performance, there is the requirement of the creation of continuous quality performance for the achievement of competitive advantage.

The study has also demonstrated that, where quality is upgraded, there is the willingness for customers to pay higher prices. It is also seen from the research that, other elements also contribute towards the achievement of competitive advantage apart from quality of service, and that, quality in itself varies in the eyes of different consumers.

Another lesson from the study is that, consumers, especially, those in the developing countries are gradually becoming discerning and knowledgeable of the changing business environment making them more demanding than ever before. Therefore, the provision of quality service is discovered to be a major factor for customer retention.

The study has therefore proven that, the concept of quality customer service plays an important role in gaining competitive advantage, however, the theory of competitive advantage emphasized other contributory factors; and irrespective of how insignificant some of these factors may be, they together makes the effort of the firm complete, therefore, attention is needed towards the achievement of this goal of improving the quality of service.

#### 4.2 Recommendations

It is obvious that the identification and offering of quality customer service that goes beyond meeting customers' expectation to exceeding it is essential for the survival of any organisation. This requires a perfect blend of both internal marketing techniques targeted at internal customers (staff) and external marketing techniques targeted at the final customer. Dunstone (2001) puts it in a more philosophical way when he stated that "if you look after the customer and after the people who look after the customer well, you will succeed".

It is observed that quality customer service plays a very significant role towards achieving a sustainable competitive advantage. It is therefore imperative that the industry develops a systematic approach towards building a system that places customers at the pivotal point of the organization.

It is important that the companies spend much to build high quality networks and expand it to the reach of the rural areas where there is no availability of the telephone networks but are also potential beneficiaries of communication technologies.

It is also recommended that the companies set out to assist in the implementation of basic training systems and structures for its employees to ensure proper and optimum use of their resources that meets the expectation of the customers. Thus, a well-defined concept of quality customer care strategy is needed to serve as guidelines to the employees. The marketing department must consist of well-trained and effective sale people to ensure the companies' exposure to the market.

The slow approval and implementation of project by the companies as well as bureaucracies which cost considerable time and energy should be discouraged and rather invest much on the improvement of quality service.

The success of any business strategy lies in its ability to demonstrate impact on what keeps the executives awake at night. There is therefore the need to update the knowledge and skills of the marketing officers to improve their knowledge of the marketing situation to make them proactive in the changing marketing environment.

As observed by Adcock (2000, p5), 'the idea of a profit exchange is summarized in the basic marketing concept, and this indicates that the starting point for many marketing actions is a deep understanding of the appropriate consumer desires'. The research revealed that, the basic needs of the customers are not met due to lack of understanding of their needs and wants. It is important that appropriate survey of the customers is conducted from time to time in order to bring clarity and action to the company's priorities.

Another important recommendation is that, the companies should make readily available information to researchers, so that they could evaluate and better assess the organizations areas of concern and suggest some ideas that might help in the achievement of competitive advantage.

Finally, it is concluded that, the application of the above recommendations by the management of the companies would help improve their competitive edge and establish good relationships with the customers.

Several theories and concepts were considered in conducting the research. Additional research especially, the implications for marketing strategy and tactics in a different geographical setting would make interesting study.

It is also important for a comparative research to be carried out in other service industries to get a broad picture

of how quality customer service plays an important role for every firm. In conclusion, it is the view of the authors that, the conclusions drawn from the research is seen as "preliminary and exploratory, rather than definitive"

Blumenthal ( 2000 ).

## References

- Adcock, D., ( 2000 ), *Marketing Strategy for Competitive Advantage*. Chichester. Wiley
- Ahmad R. and Buttle, F. (2002) "*Customer retention management: a reflection of theory and Practice*, Marketing Intelligence and planning, vol.20 No 3, pp149-161.
- Day George, S. and Prakesh Nedungadi, (1994). *Managerial Representations of Competitive Advantage*. *Journal of Marketing*, 58 (31-45).
- Erberg, J (1996). *Information and Communication Infrastructure Development in Africa*.
- Ghana Telecom 2001, *Ghana Telecom after Privatisation*.
- Ghemawat, P. (1986) *Sustainable Advantage*. *Harvard Business Review*; 53-58.
- Johnson, G., and Scholes, D., (1997). *Exploring Corporate Strategy, 4th Edn*.
- Murray J.A. and O'Driscoll, A., (1996), *Strategy and Process in Marketing*.
- Henderson, Bruce, (1983) *The Anatomy of Competition*. *Journal of Marketing*.
- Hunt, Shelby D. and Robert M. Morgan, 1995, *The Comparative Advantage Theory of Competition*. *Journal of Marketing*; 59: 1-14.
- Woodruff, and Robert B., 1997, *Customer value: The Next Source for Competitive Advantage*. *Journal of the Academy of Marketing Science* 25 (2).
- Tetteh-Addy, J., 2003, *Ghana Telecom House Journal*.
- International Telecommunications Union (ITU), 1996, *African Telecommunication Indicators*.
- Kotler, P., 1997, *Marketing Management: Analysis, Planning, Implementation and Control, 9th Edn*.
- Hooley, G., 1993, *Market-led Quality Management*, *Journal of Marketing Management*,
- Slater, S.F. and Narver, J.C., 1995, *Market Orientation and the Learning Organisation*, *Journal of Marketing*: p.53-74.
- Philips, L. Chang, W. Dae, R. Buzzel, R.D, (1983) "*Product quality, cost position and business performance, a test for some key hypothesis*" *Journal of marketing*, vol. 47, no. 2 pp26-44.
- George, W.R. (1977), "*The retailing of services: a challenging future*", *Journal of Retailing*, Fall, pp.85-98.
- Gronroos, C. (1984) "*A service quality model and its implications*" *European journal of Marketing*,
- Pierce, N. (1995) "*Customer satisfaction and internal market: marketing our customers to our employees*" *Journal of marketing practice, applied marketing science*, vol.1 No 1,pp.22-44.
- Parasuraman, Zeithaml and Berry (1985) "*The Gap Model of perceived service quality*"
- Johnson, William C. et al (2002) "*Service quality in the Thai telecommunication industry: a tool for achieving a sustainable competitive advantage*" *Journal of management decision*. Vol.4 No.7 pp 693-701.
- Onwumechili Chuka et al, (2003) "*The morning of competition: Nigeria's NITEL drags its feet with poor customer service*", *the journal of policy, regulation and strategy for Telecommunications*; vol.5 no. 3 pp.65-71.

## Websites:

[www.ghanaweb.com](http://www.ghanaweb.com)