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SWP 31/93 MANAGING SERVICE RECOVERY

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MANAGING SERVICE RECOVERY

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Summary

There has been increasing discussion about the link between customer retention and profitability. Customer retention is proposed to be associated with the capability of a service company to deliver consistent quality and to be able to recover well when things do go wrong. The ability for a service firm to compete on the promise of unconditional guarantees probably rests with competence in the delivery of service quality and capable service recovery. The role of front line personnel is perceived to be integral in the process.

The paper presents the findings of a survey of UK service managers across a spectrum of service sectors to investigate current attitudes and approaches to service recovery. The findings from the survey are discussed with reference to a model for considering the empowerment of service front line staff.

Introduction

In service organisations the link has been made between customer retention over a period of time and profitability based on the assumption that the costs of maintaining customers are lower than the costs of recruiting new customers, and that there are further opportunities to sell additional services to the retained customer base and gain from their word of mouth advertising (Heskett et al 1990). Heskett (1992) has developed a proposition from the findings of customer retention that customer retention links to customer satisfaction. This assertion is supported by the work of Technical Assistance Research Programme Inc. TARP (Lash 1989) who have demonstrated for a range of service organisations that the propensity to re-purchase (ie to be retained) is linked to customer satisfaction.

The question arises as to what leads to customer satisfaction. The commonsense supposition that a positive outcome of service is linked to the matching of expectation and experience of the service provision has been demonstrated

quantitatively in the use of the SERVQUAL approach of Parasuraman, Zeithmal and Berry (1988). The expression of satisfaction is though linked not only to the provision of fault free service but also what happens when things go wrong. Hart et al (1990), Zemke (1991) and Zemke and Bell (1990) argue that service recovery (ie the ability to put things right for the customer in a meaningful way when they go wrong) is an important element in customer satisfaction. Again the work of TARP would lend support to the argument; they demonstrate that customer satisfaction and willingness of customers to stay with the service provider are strongly associated with the way in which complaints are dealt with. Poor resolution of complaints or a perception on the part of the customer of being mollified leads to greater ill feeling towards the service provider than if no complaint had been made.

In the literature there is no consideration of differences which might arise in business to business and business to consumer service provision, in both the need for service recovery and the way in which service recovery is triggered and carried out.

Another strand to the argument of what makes for customer satisfaction comes from a consideration of service guarantees and services pledges. Hart (1988) and Hart et al (1992) argue the case for unconditional guarantees as a powerful way of gaining customer satisfaction by in effect saying "we will meet all of your expectations". It is acknowledged by these authors that while the benefits to customers of unconditional guarantees which are meaningful may be self evident, there are clearly risks associated with the cost of delivering on the promise.

The Service Profit Chain

The picture emerges of a chain of activities which are linked. Heskett (1992) refers to this as the chain of profitability. Customer retention results from customer satisfaction which is itself a consequence of unconditional guarantees (if offered) and the ability to recover when things go wrong. It is perhaps a reasonable proposition that if a service organisation is able to offer meaningful service guarantees without "giving away the shop" it should be capable of delivering consistent service for 80 - 90% of service encounters and only have to put things right either through recovery or delivering the guarantee in the

remaining 10%. It has been argued elsewhere (Armistead and Clark 1992) that the ability to recover is linked in part to the adoption of "coping" strategies in managing capacity. Consistency of service delivery will arise from designing delivery systems with capable structures, processes, people, and systems and having effective operational control in the areas of quality management, capacity management, and resource productivity management. The resulting chain to customer retention is shown in Figure 1.

The Role of Empowerment

The writers (Hart et al 1990) on service recovery suggest that the empowerment of front line staff is an important element in the ability to recover. The case for empowerment has been discussed by Bowen and Lawler (1992). These authors consider employees are empowered " if they:

- get information about organisational performance
- are rewarded for contributing to organisational performance
- have the knowledge and skills to understand and contribute to organisational performance
- have the power to make decisions that influence organisational direction and performance"

Other authors (Thomas and Velthouse 1990) have discussed in detail the relationship of empowerment to what they describe as the "intrinsic task motivation" linking empowerment with motivation to successfully complete a task. The task for service providers is associated with four elements:

- *impact* ie the degree to which what the individual does is seen as making a difference
- *competence* ie the extent to which an individual can perform a task with confidence that the result will be satisfactory

- *meaningfulness* is the extent to which the task of the individual leads to commitment and involvement rather than apathy and feelings of detachment
- *choice* is the extent to which the individual can determine what is done and when it is done

In the context of service delivery and service recovery the task is managing the service encounter and effecting service recovery.

Alpander (1991) has suggested empowerment is concerned with meeting the needs of individuals in five areas that are relevant to the work situation. These are economic security, belongingness, recognition, control and self worth. Alpander's research indicated that *need to control* was the highest need.

These expressions of empowerment around the task of the individual suggest the importance of the individual's perception of empowerment rather than any intent on the part of an organisation to be an empowered organisation. A recognition of this potential inconsistency between the organisation's intent and the individual's needs and motivation has led us to propose the following model for considering the implications of changes caused either by the organisations movement along a scale between being driven by procedures and systems, ie an *imposed* organisation and a freer *empowered* organisation. Against this there is the individual's need and motivation to have discretion over the task in terms of what is done, how it is done, and when it is done; this discretion can be expressed on a scale of low to high. Bringing the two scales together produces a matrix in Figure 2 with the following four characteristics:

Case 1 : Compliant (Low Discretion - Imposed System)

In this case the organisation runs on imposed systems and the level of discretion expected of the employee is low. It relates to routine services which are often cost sensitive or where quality consistency is important. Here the system drives service delivery although attempts should be made to humanize it through involvement and communication.

Case 2: Adaptive (High Discretion - Empowered Organisation)

In this case the organisation's employees are given a high degree of discretion in their roles. It relates to professional services where there is considerable freedom to shape the service delivery to needs of clients and customers.

In cases 1 and 2 there is a match between the type of organisation and the expectation of the degree of discretion expected of the employees by managers and by the employees of themselves. Both cases are acceptable alternatives. However in some circumstances an organisation may wish to move from one state to another and here the problems arise because it is very improbable that a move can be made instantaneously between the *compliant* and the *adaptive* states. Instead any movement tends to be into the other two boxes in the matrix, ie the *anxiety* state or the *frustration* state.

Case 3: Anxiety (Low Discretion - Empowered Organisation)

In this case the organisation may be seeking to empower employees but the perception either real or imagined on the part of employees is that they have a low level of discretion. This leads to people feeling anxious about their role. If the movement has been from the *compliant* state people are uneasy with the lack of a strong guiding system. If the movement is from the *adaptive* state people are confused by the loss of discretion.

Case 4: Frustration (High Discretion - Imposed Systems)

In this case employees are frustrated by the constraints imposed by the systems when there is the expectation of a high degree of discretion. This is especially true when there is movement from the *adaptive* box into the *frustration* box or when employees are told and trained to have greater discretion but find that formal systems still constrain and dictate what happens.

A proposition is that any movement from either empowered to imposed by an organisation will lead to frustration or anxiety in some or all of its employees.

The model has implications for service recovery performed by front line service staff and would lead to the propositions that:

Proposition 1: In the *compliant* state service recovery could only be delivered successfully within clear guidelines on what employees could do and when.

Proposition 2: In the *adaptive* state service recovery relies on individuals responding to the needs of customers with the assurance that the organisation will support their actions.

Proposition 3: In the *anxiety* or *frustration* states it is unlikely that service recovery could be successfully achieved.

Research Questions and Methodology

The present study investigated service recovery across a range of organisations in the service sector. The aims of the study were to find out:

- * The perception of managers of the importance of service recovery to maintaining customer satisfaction
- * The actions being taken to build recovery into the service delivery system
- * How recovery is triggered, either by formal measurement systems or by informal means

Research Propositions

In association with the research questions a number of propositions were established on the basis of the literature and anecdotal dealings with service organisations.

1. Service managers perceive a link between service recovery and customer retention.
2. Few organisations measure customer loss rates.
3. Most recovery is initiated by customer complaint.

4. Front line staff can act to recover when the problem is seen as minor
5. Service recovery is more likely to involve refunds and replacement where this is possible (ie when a product is involved)
6. There are differences in recovery behaviour for service encounters which are business to business relationships compared to business to consumer

The research was based on a postal survey which was sent to 2000 service managers across the services sector. In the preface to the survey service recovery was defined as follows:

" It is said that one of the marks of a good service organisation is the ability to recover effectively from problems and mistakes.

We define "recovery" as specific actions required to ensure that the customer receives a reasonable level of service after problems have occurred to disrupt "normal" service. These problems may be as a direct result of problems or errors in the service organisation itself, or may be to some extent outside its control. These may be customer induced or the result of the actions of other associated organisations. The three groups of situations requiring recovery are illustrated below, using the example of an airline:

Service Provider Error: The airline fails to have aircraft ready on time or loses luggage in transit.

Customer Error: A customer forgets his or her passport or fails to meet the check-in time.

Associated organisation error: Immigration is overloaded, or air traffic controllers are on strike.

Many service organisations are able to tell stories about specific occasions when employees have worked exceptionally hard, beyond the call of duty to keep customers happy. The problem is that these examples of exceptional service may not be the norm, customers experiencing on average rather more indifferent service.

We are interested in your organisation's experience of the following:

- a) Avoiding the need for recovery by "doing it right first time".
- b) Developing techniques and procedures for dealing with problems.
- c) Changing attitudes throughout the organisation to increase the degree of responsiveness of employees to customer needs.
- d) Establishing the importance of recovery to the customers' perception of the service you provide."

The survey instrument contained a mix of open ended and specific questions.

Results

Replies were received from 157 managers with a distribution across the service sector as shown in Table 1. The category Customer Service, includes service activities associated with manufacturing organisations. One of the reasons for a relatively low response rate might be that some manufacturing organisations do not recognise the Service aspects of their task.

| Sector | Percentage |
|-----------------------|-------------------|
| Professional Services | 17.5 |
| Banking and Finance | 9.5 |
| Retail and Hotels | 8.0 |
| Customer Service | 48.9 |
| Distribution | 9.5 |
| Public Sector | 6.6 |

Spread of Respondents

Table 1

Respondents were asked to indicate the importance of service recovery to their business on a scale of not important (1) to vital (5). The weighted result of 4.5 indicates the strength of the perceived importance.

Respondents were asked the extent to which they linked service recovery and customer retention. The response were not quantified but fell into four categories characterised by the following quotes:

- "We perceive there is a strong link"
- "It is difficult to prove the link"
- "We are trying to measure the link"
- "There is no link!"

An attempt was made to explore the extent to which the respondents measured either the cost of a lost customer or make measurements of customer retention. The cost of a lost customer was claimed to be measured by 40% of respondents. However the way in which measurement occurs was in most cases on the basis of the perception of lost business rather than detailed measurement. There was only one respondent who has a system for tracking customer satisfaction.

Only 43% of respondents measure customer retention with repeat business or renewal of service contracts or market research information being the indicators of retention. There was no clear evidence of service organisations tracking the retention of specific customers over a period of years.

Respondents were asked to identify the need for recovery in a typical operating unit and the replies are shown in Table 2.

| Timing | % of Sample |
|-----------------|--------------------|
| Continuously | 25.6 |
| Daily | 19.5 |
| Weekly | 13.4 |
| Fortnightly | 7.3 |
| Monthly | 6.1 |
| Quarterly | 6.1 |
| Every two years | 1.2 |
| Not known | 20.7 |

Frequency of the need for recovery in a typical operating unit

Table 2

Respondents were asked to state the factor which caused the need for service recovery on a scale between, it never occurs (1) and very frequently (5). The results are shown in Table 3.

| Cause | Weighting 1-5 |
|-----------------------------|----------------------|
| Customers | 3.2 |
| Other service organisations | 3.0 |
| Front line staff | 3.3 |
| Information system faults | 3.0 |
| Equipment faults | 2.9 |
| Back room support | 3.0 |
| Communication | 3.5 |

Most common causes of problems

Table 3

The means by which a judgement of the causes was made was either on the basis of the perception of managers (64% of replies) or measurement (44% of replies). There was no attempt to reconcile which factors were assessed by measurement and which by perception.

Respondents were asked the extent to which service recovery was initiated by staff or management monitoring, formal measuring systems, customer complaints, or on the initiative of front line staff. The extent of the responses was on a scale of, it never occurs (1) and very frequently (5). The results are shown in Table 4. Perhaps not surprisingly customer complaint was the most frequent trigger for recovery.

| Action | Weighting 1-5 |
|-----------------------------|----------------------|
| Staff/management monitoring | 3.5 |
| Formal measurement systems | 3.0 |
| Customer complaint | 4.1 |
| Front line initiative | 3.5 |

How service recovery is triggered
Table 4

Respondents were asked how quickly they needed to initiate service recovery. The results were within minutes for 30% of respondents, within hours for 46% of respondents, and within days for 24% of respondents. Associated with time to initiate recovery is the time to complete service recovery. Respondents reported times within minutes (13% of replies), within hours (35% of replies), within days (44% of replies). Only 47% of respondents reported having escalation procedures for service recovery (for when front line staff need assistance).

Respondents were asked the extent to which front line staff take extraordinary action to resolve problems when there is a minor problem, a major problem, and when the problem is clearly caused by the customer on a scale between never (1) and always (5). The results are shown in Table 5. There is a greater tendency for front line staff to deal with minor problems and to seek additional advice or support for major problems.

| Problem type | Weighting |
|--|------------------|
| When there is a minor problem | 4.4 |
| When there is a major problem | 3.5 |
| When the customer has caused the problem | 3.9 |

The extent to which front line staff take action to solve problems

Table 5

Respondents were asked to identify if they were empowering staff; 75% claimed to be doing so. Critical factors in the process of empowerment included: training, support, communication and information availability, delegation and partnership.

As recovery is often associated with a spend on resources the authority given to front line staff to spend up to a given amount may be important. Respondents were asked the extent of this authority given to front line staff and the results are shown in Table 6.

| Extent | % of Sample |
|----------------|--------------------|
| Nil | 27.4% |
| Less than £50 | 12.4% |
| Less than £100 | 6.2% |
| Over £100 | 49.6% |
| No Limit | 4.4% |

Extent of authority of front line staff

Table 6

The value of the spend allowed to front line staff as a percentage of the average customer spend is shown in Table 7.

| Value | % of Sample |
|----------------|--------------------|
| Less than 25 % | 61 % |
| 25 % to 50 % | 6 % |
| 50 % to 75 % | 4 % |
| More than 75 % | 29 % |

Value of average customer spend front line staff can use for recovery

Table 7

The actions taken to recover can be grouped in the categories of replacement (particularly if a product is involved), financial reparation or other gifts, refunds, or reparation and refunds. It was not possible from the survey data to establish the extent to which each was viewed as the most important. However there are some indications that replacement was the more likely mode of recovery when a product is part of the service package; if not some reparation and partial refund was preferred. Full refunds or financial reparation are the less likely actions.

When recovery is clearly initiated by customer complaints the following comments summarise the statements given by respondents:

- there is little evidence of statements which indicate finding out exactly what customers want.
- there were few statements of apologising to customers.
- there is a recognition of the need to respond honestly and with a personal contact which may involve more senior staff if the problem is perceived to be major.
- refunds and doing work free of charge where appropriate are common approaches.
- relating to recovery more generally, some respondents made the point of the need to balance recompense and resolution of problems.

Finally, respondents were asked to reflect on the future importance of service recovery. Some saw it becoming more important especially with respect to increasing the speed of response. Others talked of quality programmes removing the need for service recovery through a right first time approach.

Discussion and Analysis

The results from the survey go some way to providing answers to the questions raised earlier. Service managers do perceive that service recovery is important to their business and many feel there is a link with customer retention. However others would hold that there is no link or that it is difficult to measure. The issue of measurement corresponds with the lack of evidence of many service organisations having formal methods of measuring customer retention, and no stated cases from the sample of measuring customer perceptions of service recovery as an indicator of customer retention.

The need to recover can be caused by many different factors associated with service delivery by front line staff and no one factor emerged as significantly more prone to cause things to go wrong. The ability of managers to give a view of causes on the basis of measurement rather than perception was encouragingly high, suggesting that many have formal measurement of when things go wrong. This is substantiated by the responses to the question on their need to recover; 80% of the respondents were able to identify the frequency. The 20% who claimed not to know how often recovery occurs may be delivering highly consistent service or more likely, may be in a constant state of recovery.

The ways in which service recovery is initiated tends to be as a result of customers complaining rather than by the action of staff and management. If service firms were to be more proactive in anticipating when recovery is necessary, future surveys of this type would perhaps see a greater emphasis on front line initiative or formal measuring systems.

What happens when service recovery occurs depends on whether it is perceived by the front line staff to be a minor or a major problem. This is not surprising, although it would be interesting to know more about how front line staff make a decision to deal with the matter themselves or to call for assistance. What would

have been expected would be that in all cases front line staff start the process of recovery, if only by acknowledging the fact either to colleagues or supervisors or customers. The fact that only 30% of respondents said that recovery is started within minutes is disturbing, if it is a true reflection of what happens.

The extent of the authority given to front line staff to make reparation, give refunds of replacements, or financial gifts, and the value related to the cost of the service show two zones. Over 50% of the sample reported that front line staff have the authority to spend over £100 and about 30% say that this amounts to more than 75% of the value of the service. This suggests that for 30% front line staff are providing a straight replacement or refund for a product and or service as the means of recovery.

Some of the responses appear to blame frontline staff for lack of responsiveness. It would be interesting to repeat this research from the perspective of the employee rather than that of the manager.

For the 25% of respondents who give no authority to front line staff to spend to recover, it suggests either they must refer all cases to managers or other groups, or that the respondents were only considering the authority to spend money rather than to consume resources in the service recovery process.

Business to Business versus Business to Consumer

The business to business relationship is likely to be different to the business to consumer. In business to business relationships the buyer and user are often different individuals or groups and the overall value of services bought are greater. The consequence is that the expectations of service delivery and the need for recovery may be different.

The sample was split into two categories, business to business and business to consumer, using data on the nature of their business. Separate analyses for each group were undertaken.

The results showed significant differences in some areas for the sample. The business to consumer firms are more likely to be part of a network rather than

single site and consequently employ more staff. They are more likely to need to recover continuously or daily or not know how frequently. In consequence, they are more likely to initiate service recovery within minutes rather than the hours for business to business service firms. Also business to consumer firms are more likely to authorise front line staff to spend more than 50% of the value of the average customer spend on service recovery. In other respects there are no significant differences.

These results correspond with the business to consumer service organisation which has a high number of service encounters; hence the need to recover continuously. The service package is more likely to be fairly standard; hence the authority given to staff to spend a high proportion of the average customer spend on service recovery, as the costs of what is being given is known and the risks of giving away too much can be assessed.

Implications for Empowerment

The present study was focussed on service recovery and not empowerment of service workers. However 75% of the respondents claimed to be empowering staff through training, delegation with authority, involvement in procedures, communication of policy. There was also considerable mention of formal measurement systems including the quality standard BS5750.

These findings would suggest that the service organisations represented in the sample perceive themselves to be moving upwards on the imposed empowered scale of the empowerment matrix. What is not known is the perceptions of staff of these changes. Talk of formal procedures would suggest that in reality the modus operandi is more *imposed*. Hence it is likely that staff are often frustrated unless the extent of the empowerment for service recovery is clearly defined.

There are indications of a realisation of the dangers of moving staff into the *anxiety* quadrant of the matrix as instanced by one comment:

"Empowerment must mean something to the staff themselves. I believe front line staff do not necessarily want to be empowered at all times. It needs to be handled with care and gradually implemented so it becomes part of the culture of the organisation".

Conclusions

Service managers perceived service recovery to be important to their business and likely to increase in the future with the need to meet service pledges associated with Service Charters. They also generally perceive a link between service recovery and customer retention.

Less than half the service organisations currently measure the cost of a lost or dissatisfied customer and customer retention.

Service recovery is still most likely to be triggered by customer complaint and if it is a business to consumer service, it will be initiated within minutes and be resolved by front line staff having the authority to use over 50% of the average customer spend to put things right, mainly by replacement or refund. Business to business services take longer to activate service recovery (hours or longer) and the front line staff have less authority to use a high proportion of the average spend, although there may be no difference in the actual amounts involved between the classes of services.

Overall the service organisations in the sample are taking steps to bring about service recovery. However the indications are that it could be improved by better measurement and triggering and by a consideration of the most appropriate strategies for recovery (for instance a wider use of escalation procedures). Whether a true reflection or not, the impression given by respondents is of a lack of checking with the customers of what is needed.

Over 75% of the service organisations claim to be empowering service staff. However doubts remain as to the overall effectiveness of the changes. In some cases the front line staff do not wish for the change or are not adequately prepared and consequently fail to fulfil their new expected roles. In other cases

the intention to empower is blocked by inappropriate systems and frustrated staff.

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