



**SOME ASPECTS OF
MANAGEMENT IN
DISTANCE LEARNING**

Edited by ADAMS ONUKA

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IN DISTANCE LEARNING

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Chapter Two

THE CUSTOMER/CLIENT SERVICE IN DISTANCE LEARNING PROGRAMME

By

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Introduction

Business concerns have goals and objectives for which they were established by owners to meet. All educational institutions are in business of providing the citizenry with education in order to grow and develop a national economy. Individuals and corporate bodies are in business for different goals/objectives. The nature of these individual and group businesses varies in content, context and composition. The University of Ibadan is one of such corporate bodies in the world of the knowledge business. It has many branches or academic units, in this knowledge commodity merchandise that it uses to pursue its business interests. The Distance Learning Centre (DLC) is one of them. Thus, University of Ibadan Distance Learning Centre (DLC) could be viewed as a 'business outfit'. In this paper issues that border on effective customer service giver relationship were discussed. Issues that have to do with how DLC University of Ibadan staff (teaching and administrative) would arouse and sustain the interest of potential clients (candidates who wish to undergo some programmes and their sponsors) such that they will not be disappointed in the service that will be rendered to them by the staff at the centre are also outlined and discussed.

Customer/Client relationship management

The word 'customer' and 'client', are usually used to refer to a current or potential buyer or user of the products or service of an individual or organization, called the supplier, seller, or vendor. This is typically through purchasing or renting goods or services. However, in certain contexts, the term *customer/client* also includes anyone who uses or experiences the services of another. The slogans, "The customer is king." or "The customer is god." or "The customer is always right." indicate the importance of customers/clients to business outfits - although the last expression is sometimes used ironically. However, "customer" also has a more generalised meaning in customer service and a less commercialised meaning in not-for-profit organisations/institutions.

To avoid unwanted implications in some areas such as government services, community services, and education, the term "customer" is sometimes substituted with words such as "constituent" or "stakeholder". This is done to address concerns that the word "customer" implies a narrow commercial relationship involving the purchase of products and services. However, some managers in this environment, in which the emphasis is on being helpful to the people, they are dealing with rather than on commercial sales, comfortably use the word "service users" to both internal and external customers.]

Customer relationship management is a broadly recognized, widely-implemented strategy for managing and nurturing a company's interactions with clients and sales prospects. It involves using technology to organize, automate, and synchronize business processes principally sales activities, but also those for marketing, customer service, and technical support. The overall goals are to find, attract, and win new clients, nurture and retain those the company already has, entice new clients into the fold, and reduce the costs of marketing and client service.

What the DLC Staff think about our service users (customers) can influence the way we deal with them. Carefully thought-out marketing plans and sufficiently resourced implementation programs are essential to deliver a desired level of market and financial performance. The best result of a business transaction should be customer satisfaction. In today's global competitive world, customers expect more, have more choices and are less brand-loyal. Any business outfit which at one time dominates the market may at another face the risk of survival. This is because the only thing that appears constant in life is change. Change in this context can occur at three levels customer, competitors and environment. Change at the customer level could stem from the customers' needs, demographic location, lifestyle and their consumption behaviour (all tilting towards how much the potential customers of DLC are interested in the pursuance of education related matters); competitors could change as new technologies emerge and would want to out-perform others delivering similar services (e.g. on-line registration, posting students' coursework on the net as well as delivering lectures via the most sought for radio/television stations, provision of course materials, among others); whereas the environment in which the business outfit operates could also change as economic, political, social technological forces shift. Business that can sense the direction of change, and position themselves to lead in the change, will most likely prosper and grow. They are constantly in tune with customers' needs, competitors' strategies, changing environmental conditions, and emerging technologies, and thus, seek ways to continuously provide solutions to improve.

Business with a strong market orientation not only outperforms their competitors in delivering higher levels of customer satisfaction, they also deliver higher profits and create greater customer value and broader client-base/clientele. Market orientation means a strong focus on customers, and working well across functions in order to

deliver customer solutions that are superior to those of the competitors. However, the real benefit of market orientation is higher levels of customer satisfaction. For a business to have strong market orientation, it should be guided by the following:

Be customer focused - always eager to understand customer needs and deliver customer satisfaction;

competitor orientation - continuous recognition of competitors sources of advantage and market strategies and

team approach - cross-functional teams dedicated to develop and delivering customers satisfaction.

A strong customer-focus enables a business to stay in close contact with customer needs and satisfaction. Marketing strategies should be built around customer needs and other sources of customer satisfaction, be in a position to understand key competitors and evolving competitive forces. This could enable the service giver to track its relative competitiveness with respect to service quality, service availability and customer satisfaction, among others. Issues that border on staff in any business outfit working as a team across functions which influences cross-functional skills and other activities that impact customer response and satisfaction are very important.

Thus, for many businesses, regular evaluation of customer satisfaction should be carried out. This will give the service providers leading indicators of their performance level and where to improve in future. For instance, in the event of decline in customer satisfaction, results from such studies could serve as an eye opener or give an early warning signal, thus providing the service givers the opportunity to correct the problem before real damage is done. If a business outfit such as ours does not track customer satisfaction, it

may forego the opportunity to correct the problems before decline in sales (number of candidates seeking admission into the programme) and profit sets in.

According to Gronlund (1976), evaluation is the quantitative and qualitative description of the extent to which the objectives underlying the setting up of such outfit is achieved. This could be in form of learners' level of achievement of the outlined course/instructional objectives, level of students' turn-over as well as the quality of service provided. Evaluation activities should be continuous and systematic and carried out at regular intervals. Okpala, Onocha and Oyedeji (1993) provided a framework for a working definition of evaluation as "a process of gathering valid information on attainment of educational objectives, analyzing and fashioning information to aid judgement on the effectiveness of teaching or an educational programme". In the profit-making business parlance, this is known as 'market research'.

Considering the importance of the services rendered by Distance Learning Centre with respect to reducing the admission trauma suffered by a large percentage of Nigerian men and women who could not make university education through UTME. When the development of the concerned learners is considered too, the feedback from such evaluation activities would provide an insight into the way and manner the DLC staff carry out their activities.

Customer Satisfaction a key to Market Performance Measurement

There are many ways to measure customer satisfaction. However, a common measure of customer satisfaction can be derived from asking customers what factors they consider important in achieving satisfaction from a particular service, and how they perceive the performance of a business and its competitors on these factors. Such factors may include in the context of DLC:

- ❖ High quality teaching and learning activities;
- ❖ High rate of student turn over/completion of programme by candidates at the record time;
- ❖ Quality of service from both teaching and administrative staff;
- ❖ Uninterrupted programme-session devoid of strike actions;
- ❖ Service provider responsiveness to service users' problem;
- ❖ Ease of use and availability of teaching aids.

When this method of measuring customer satisfaction is applied to a sample of customers, one can compute the average customer satisfaction for each competitor and this can to a reasonable extent, aid productivity and customer satisfaction. This is because, dissatisfied customers often do not complain to the service providers, but they do walk away and this can affect learner intake in the context of distance learning and its profit making.

How do we ensure good salesmanship?

In order for us to sell our services to the public effectively, all the separate units/sections (all staff members involved in service provision teaching, technical and administrative staff) must work together as a team and see one another as partners in progress. This could require constant observation, evaluation and modification of our method of doing things to enable us fit into the ever changing world. Marketing is; in effect, salesmanship. Its only long-term purpose is making and boosting its sales. In order to achieve this it uses various vehicles, such as branding, relationship management, lead generation, etc. However, marketing does not work if it does not generate sales and in the case of DLC increase learner intakes progressively.

Client Relationship and Customer Service

Convincing a client is only a small portion of the actual work needed to ensure client retention and clientele expansion programme. Real profits are made through client retention and constant sales to potential clients/customers.

Client retention requires:

- ❖ Thorough client relationship management
- ❖ Having insight into the client needs.
- ❖ Attaining relevant information from the client.
- ❖ Rewarding the client.
- ❖ Adjusting marketing and communicational activities to suit clients' needs and his preferences.
- ❖ Finding what the clients' needs and expectations are and then exceeding them.
- ❖ Increasing service value to the client.
- ❖ Increasing the clients' satisfaction.
- ❖ Keeping constant contact with the client.
- ❖ Having a Listening ear to customer complaints.

Customer service is one of the basic elements of developing client relationships. Owners of business outfits should continuously work on improving their customer service, thus increasing the clients' satisfaction. Customer service is not only a helpdesk or having an on-line support centre, but is expanded to meeting every requirement of the client, as long as it is financially feasible. Customer service is about getting the company closer to the client, doing it the way the client wants it, without aggression or unwanted intrusion.

Conclusion

The University of Ibadan is noted for its high standards in academics and other areas of interests. The DLC as an important arm of the university rendering both academic and business services to the

public should continue in this tradition of excellence. If staff and management/customer relationship is given top priority by every DLC management staff, then its services would be constantly in high demand. The Centre can be sure of its continued relevance in the competitive world of distance/open learning. Thus, as the clients enjoy quality service delivery provided by the Centre automatically become salespersons for the Centre to the outside world especially in our ever competitive knowledge commodity market. Consequently, the clientele based would expand as well as retained.

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