Gaining Customer Satisfaction Through Frontline Employee Orientation: A Customer-Centric Approach

Ms Sapna Choraria,
Doctoral Student (Marketing)
Institute of Management, Nirma University
Ahmedabad

Ms Shrabani Balaram Bhattacharjee
Doctoral Student (HR)
Institute of Management, Nirma University
Ahmedabad

Abstract

The healthcare industry is one of the booming industries of the Indian economy. The industry views the role of employee orientation as a critical task to maintain their position and profit in the competitive landscape of Indian healthcare market. From the literature review, it is evident that the orientation of frontline employees is majorly affected by the variables of job satisfaction and employee commitment. Controlling these variables, the organization can achieve the delivery of higher level of quality service to their customers which ultimately influences the degree of customer satisfaction. This employee point-of-view study examines the relationship between variables of job satisfaction-employee commitment and frontline employee orientation to deliver quality service and achieve customer satisfaction. A self-designed questionnaire was used to sample 200 frontline employee respondents from the hospitals of Ahmedabad city and the data was analyzed using structural equation modeling (SEM). Later, the result was compared with the factors identified from the data collected from the management team of the private sector hospitals to understand the differences in the perception. However, the study was limited to the specific sector and city while extraneous variables like experience, gender, income, education and other psychographic variables were kept constant through elimination and randomization.

Keywords: Customer Orientation, Job Satisfaction, Job Commitment, Customer Satisfaction

1. Introduction

The expanding healthcare sector of India is one of its largest sectors in terms of revenue, employment and customer base with total revenue of approximately $34 billion. The private sector accounts for 80% of the healthcare segment in India and thus gives an opportunity of huge research gaps in terms of service provider and customer relationships. There are several studies carried out which focus on the hospital sector in terms of employee retention, employee satisfaction, customer satisfaction, customer wait experience, customer overall experience, service recovery and frontline employee orientation. This study will specifically focus on the relationship between customer orientation of the front-line employee and customer satisfaction, which is a major concerned area identified among the healthcare sector.

Today several service providers are focusing on customer retention and reference/recommendation required to create a positive brand image and increased brand equity of the organization. The service literature identifies customer retention and recommendation as an outcome of customer satisfaction. Also, with the growing competition and economic structure, building a strong customer base has become an important criterion for the survival and growth of several healthcare organizations. Therefore achieving customer satisfaction is one of the major priorities of the management while designing the organizational strategy and building manpower. However, the building blocks of customer satisfaction in service industry are greatly influenced by the employee behavior and their attitude towards the customer's problem/query. Considering the role of employee behavior, the service literature identifies customer orientation of front-line employees as a key factor to achieve customer satisfaction.

2. Literature Review

2.1 Customer Orientation

In the ongoing global trend of service industry, value based service delivery is a major competitive tool while frontline employees (FE) are the valuable assets. They are responsible for building the major customer relationships through their performance and meeting customer expectation. It has been identified that in healthcare sector, customer expectation is one of the most important criteria for dissatisfaction and degrades customer relationship that influences the brand image and profitability of the organization. The theorists therefore emphasized upon the customer orientation of front-line employees which is influenced by job satisfaction and employee commitment towards the organization [30].

The concept of customer orientation (CO) was initially defined by Kotler (1987) as a critical task of the organization which includes the identification of need, want and perception of the target segment; thereby satisfying these target segment through various modes of communication, pricing, designing and transportation strategy. The theory of CO given by Narver and Slater (1990) and Webster (1994) suggested the in-depth logic following the key dimensions such as quality, need understanding and value creation. Webster (1994) pointed out the importance of quality and quoted it as a fundamental component of CO. Later, Karvinen and Bennett (2003) identified five categories that characterized CO, namely leadership, understanding of dynamic environment, commitment to quality improvement, organizational culture and learning. These categories are supported by several researchers [5] [29] [14] [20] [15].

Table 1: Definitions based on Customer Orientation (CO)

Source	Definition
Kohli and Jaworski (1990)	They explained the concept and implementation of customer orientation among the organization in three steps: 1 One or more departments engaging in activities geared toward developing an understanding of customers' current and future needs and the factors affecting them. 2 Sharing of this understanding across departments. The various departments engaging in activities designed to meet selected customer needs.
Perreault and MacCarthy (1990)	The marketing concept says that everyone in a firm should work together to satisfy customer needs at a profit.
Narver and Slater (1990)	Inferred from the literature that market orientation consists of three behavioral components – customer orientation, competitor orientation, and inter-functional coordination – and two decision criteria – long-term focus and profitability.
Webster (1994)	Identified customer orientation and total quality management as a same entity.
Cravens (1997)	Adoption of customer orientation strategy makes the customer the focal point of a company's total operations. "A business is customer oriented when its culture is systematically and entirely committed to the continuous creation of superior customer value for its existing and future clients." It involves the use of superior organizational skills in understanding and satisfying customers.

1.1 Factors Influencing Customer-Orientation of Front-line Employees

Employee commitment and satisfaction are the major criteria for any organization to deliver quality service and achieve the state of customer satisfaction. The two identified factors play an important role in building customer orientation among the employees in an effective manner. Both employee commitment and satisfaction reflect individual's positive psychological state specifically influenced by the factors of job experiences and workplace. Commitment has been found to be casually related with employee performance in several research studies [1]. Extensive research has shown that positive employee commitment leads to lesser employee turnover and strong desire to serve the organization. Employee commitment has been seen to accumulate from various elements of organization environment like colleagues, compensation, leadership, etc [27]. It also escalates with the rise of security provided by an organization. Interestingly, it is seen that early induction and training also helps to increase the commitment level of employees.　It serves as a psychological bond that encourages individuals to act in ways that are consistent with the interests of the organization [7]. Similarly, employee satisfaction is an individual's emotional state of mind influenced by several personal and professional factors reflecting individual's state of mind at work-place [21-22].　According to several researchers, financial reward, professional development opportunities, salary packages and technology influence employee job-satisfaction significantly. Therefore, organizations focus upon fair outcome, treatment and procedures towards employees that affect their commitment and satisfaction to influence their orientation [9] [15].

On the basis of these studies, the research model establishes the hypothesis to examine the effect of employee orientation and satisfaction on their orientation. Also, according to the identified dimensions of employee commitment and satisfaction, a more satisfied employee is highly committed to their work and vice-versa [6] [32]. Thus, the study also hypothesized the relationship between employee satisfaction and commitment.

H1: There exists a positive relationship between employee commitment and customer orientation of the front-line employee.
H2: There exists a positive relationship between employee satisfaction and customer orientation of the front-line employee.
H3: There exists a positive inter-relationship between front-line employee commitment and employee satisfaction.

2.3 Customer Orientation of the Front-line Employees and Customer Satisfaction

Customer Services plays a vital role in molding customer preferences for the specific service provider. One of the major reasons that influences the customer's choice of
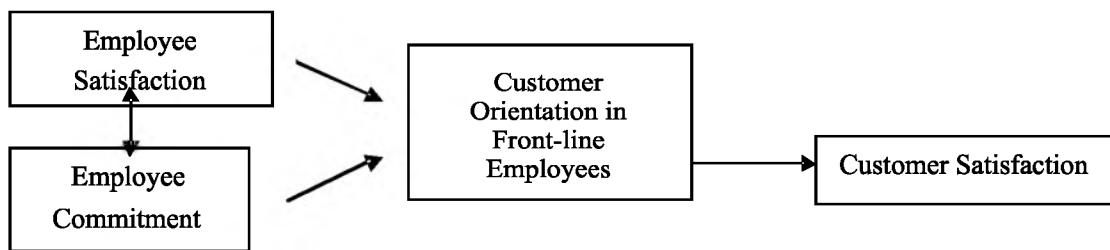
service provider is employee behavior, comprises of friendliness, responsiveness and the promptness of the employee [17]. However, customer choice is significantly influenced by the customer satisfaction with the service provider.

According to several researchers [12] [25] [36] [4] [34] [26] [8] [10], there exist three basic components which reflect the process of satisfaction in an individual:

Some type of affective, cognitive, and/or co-native response.

Based on an evaluation of product-related standards, product consumption experiences, and or purchase-related attributes (e.g., salesperson).

Expressed before choice, after choice, after consumption, after extended experience, or just about any other time a

researcher may query consumers about the product or related attributes.

Therefore conceptualization of customer satisfaction is treated either as an emotional or cognitive response. It has been defined as an evaluative process [25] [4] and concluded that satisfaction is a summary attribute phenomenon coexisting with other consumption emotions (p. 242) [26]. Later, Tse and Wilton (1988) describe satisfaction as the consumer's response to the evaluation of the perceived discrepancy between prior expectations (or some norm of performance) and the actual performance of the product as perceived after its consumption (p. 204). Thus, 'Satisfaction' is a function of fairness, preference, and disconfirmation (pp. 28-29) [24].

According to the hierarchical personality structure, customer orientation is considered as a surface level personality trait, where behavior is identified as a function of both person and the environment, representing enduring dispositions to behave across time [23]. Therefore, customer orientation of the employees is a behavioral

orientation which provides prompt solution to customer's problem, maintaining consistent level of emotionality during

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customer interaction and communicating with politeness, kindness and confidence [3]. Such influencing employee behavior promotes positive responsive behavior among the customers, their perception and results in customer satisfaction.

H4: There is a positive relationship between customer orientation of front-line employee and customer satisfaction.

2. Research Methodology

3.1 Research Objective :

On the basis of the literature review, it is evident that customer orientation of front-line employees influences the customer satisfaction during the service encounter. Customer satisfaction plays a major role in the service industry as it mainly depends upon the quality as compared to value or price attached with the service. Therefore, satisfaction defines the perceived service quality among the consumers and mainly depends upon the skills and willingness of the frontline employees. However, the positive attitude of the employees towards the provision of customer oriented service is influenced by their level of commitment Figure 1: Research Framework

and satisfaction with respect to their job profile, responsibilities and their relationship with the service provider.

Therefore, the objective of this study is to examine the role of customer orientation of front-line employees in determining the strength of customer satisfaction. This empirical study examines the relationship between job satisfaction-job commitment, influence of job satisfaction-commitment on orientation of employees as per customer need and its role in building customer satisfaction.

3.2 Sample

The booming healthcare sector in Ahmedabad city, Gujarat (India), has been selected as a sampling frame due to its significant overall growth. The private sector hospitals (with minimum 20 and above employees) were targeted due to its competitive strategy towards customer service. The sample consists of 1) Front-line employees (n= 448) 2) Management team (n=122) 3) Patients (Customers) (255). Respondents were not asked about their demographic and psychographic variables due to its omission as an extraneous variable. This helped to narrow down the focus and identify the overall

Variable	Source	Reliability
Job-Satisfaction	Rahman and Waheed (2011)	Cronbach's $\alpha = 0.79$
Job-Commitment	He, Li and Lai (2010)	Cronbach's $\alpha = 0.88$
Customer orientation of Front Line Employees	He, Li and Lai (2010), Ha and John (2010)	Cronbach's $\alpha = 0.85$
Customer Satisfaction	He, Li and Lai (2010)	Cronbach's $\alpha = 0.77$

impact of the customer orientation on customer satisfaction, irrespective to their age, educational profile, cultural aspects, income and job position. For analytical purpose, the study considers 250 sample size both from employees and customers to verify the proposed model.

3.2 Measurement Tool :

Accessing the Reliability and its Validation

Table 2. Formation of Self-designed Scale

Variable	Factor Loadings
Job-Satisfaction	
JS1	0.68
JS2	0.72
JS3	0.64
JS4	0.63
Job-Commitment	
JC1	0.74
JC2	0.77
JC3	0.80
JC4	0.62
Customer orientation of Front Line Employees	0.66
CO1	0.65
CO2	0.62
CO3	0.68
CO4	0.70
CO5	0.62
CO6	
Customer Satisfaction	
CS1	0.83
CS2	0.74
CS3	0.89
CS4	0.82

The measurement tool was developed on the basis of the previous research work from Rahman and Waheed (2011), HA and John (2010) and He et al. (2010). Each construct was measured on five point Likert scale (5= Strongly agree, 4= Agree, 3= Neither agree nor disagree, 2= Disagree and 1= Strongly disagree). The constructs of each variable were modified on the basis of requirement and their reliability was determined using Cronbach's alpha, indicating the internal consistency of the scale (Table 2). The results indicate that every construct in the proposed model reflects the reliability score of above 0.6 which signify the acceptable internal consistency of the scale. The process is followed with confirmatory factor analysis (CFA) indicating the convergent validity of the proposed constructs.

Table 3. Results of Convergent Validity: CFA Factor Loadings

Convergent validity of the scale explains high correlation among the observed variables that measures the same constructs in the proposed model (Kaplan and Sacuzzo, 1993). According to Chin, Marcolin and Newsted (1996), the factor loadings (above 0.60) of each observed variable in the construct signify the convergent validity of the model. The results in Table 3 indicates that values of each factor loadings are above 0.6 and thus the proposed measurement model caters an acceptable validity results to proceed with proposed path analysis process.

4. Data Analysis and Results

The study examines the relationship among the variables that reflects the multi-equation model. Therefore, in order to measure a series of separate, but independent, multiple regression equations, structural equation modeling was used to analyze the data and examine the defined hypothesis.
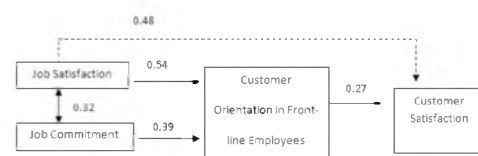

Figure 2. Results of SEM

The research framework has defined and proposed four different paths to ensure the flow of effect resulting in achieving high customer satisfaction. The analysis indicates a relationship between employee job satisfactions, job commitment and employee orientation over customer satisfaction, which is not studied in a combined way earlier. The results signify that both employee job satisfaction and job commitment affect overall customer satisfaction when mediated by orientation of frontline employees with a customer centric approach. The direct effect from employee's job commitment to customer satisfaction was low as compared to the effect mediated by customer orientation of frontline employees. The analysis shows that even though the direct effect of job commitment was positive, it was lower than the regression weight expressed in presence of a mediator. This supports the path between

employee commitment and employee orientation. Similarly effect of employee satisfaction on customer satisfaction mediated by employee orientation also yields positive effect the mediating role of employee orientation with customer centric approach. However, direct path between employee satisfaction and customer satisfaction is stronger as compared to the presence of mediator. Therefore, satisfied employee behavior affects customer satisfaction directly while highly committed employee needs an orientation approach to influence customer satisfaction. Also there exists covariance between employee commitment and satisfaction which reflect the significant difference between the two constructs related to employee characteristics. Thus, results explain that all the proposed hypothesis H1, H2, H3 and H4 are supported showing the positive relationship among the variables (Table 4). The figure shows that customer orientation of front-line employees has positive effect on customer satisfaction, whereas customer orientation of front-line employees is positively influenced by employee satisfaction and commitment. Also the model predicts the positive relationship between employee satisfaction and customer satisfaction (Figure 2).

The value of χ^2 is significant which does not meet the criteria of model fitness but the value of χ^2/df (2.64) falls in the acceptable range of 1 to 3. The other indicators of model fitness satisfy the required criteria and are above 0.9. The indicators of Baseline Comparisons such as such as Comparative fit index (CFI= 0.96), Incremental fit index (IFI= 0.96) and Normed Fit Index (NFI= 0.92) are all above 0.9 while root mean squared error of approximation (RMSEA= 0.058) is below 0.08. The strength of the model is R^2 (0.841) and explains 84% of the total variance [13]. These values indicate the achievement of an acceptable fit of the proposed model and confirm the path among the constructs for the given sample.

Table 4. Test of Research Model and Hypothesis
Model Fit Statistics: χ^2/df =2.64 (p=0.084), CFI= 0.96, IFI= 0.96, RMSEA= 0.058, R^2 = 0.841
*: p<0.05, **: p<0.01, ***: p<0.001
EC= Employee Commitment, ES= Employee Satisfaction, CO= Customer Orientation, CS=Customer Satisfaction

4.1 Comparing Management's and Front-line Employee's Perspective on Customer Orientation

Several studies indicate the existence of organization communication gap that affect employees orientation approach. Customer centric employee orientation or customer orientation of employees requires an understanding among the organization's objective and goal among its employees. The data analysis also identifies this gap among the organization's communication affecting employee orientation with customer-centric approach. The results indicate that customer orientation of the employees plays important role in deploying customer satisfaction. However, it is been identified that in every organization, there exists a gap between the front-line staff and the managerial level staff. This study focuses upon the gap that lies among these two groups in terms of customer orientation. In health care sector, the private hospitals are emphasizing more towards advancement of the front-line employee's soft skills as they are responsible for delivering

Hypothesized Relationship	Standardized Coefficient	t-Value	Results
H1: There exists a positive relationship between employee commitment and customer orientation of the front-line employee			
EC→CO	0.39	5.47***	Supported
H2: There exists a positive relationship between employee satisfaction and customer orientation of the front-line employee			
ES→CO	0.54	2.69**	Supported
H3: There exists a positive inter-relationship between front-line employee commitment and employee satisfaction			
EC→ES	0.32	0.18**	Supported
H4: There is a positive relationship between customer orientation of front-line employee and customer satisfaction			
CO→CS	0.27	7.3***	Supported

the organizational products/services in terms of quality. The results (Figure 3) reveals that there is considerable difference which lies among the front-line staff and the managerial members in terms of having awareness among the employees regarding the organization's perspective of defining it's product and services. The other factors showcase mere difference among the managements and front-line staff's perspective displaying the effective communication among the management and the employees of the organization.

Figure 3. Comparison of Management and Front-line Employee Perspective in context of Customer Orientation

Literature of services marketing support the fact that employee satisfaction and commitment affects employee performance and overall organization's productivity as they come in direct contact with the customers. With growing emergence of customer centric approach, researchers identified that these factors affect customer satisfaction too as the front-line employees are responsible for building brand image and achieving customer satisfaction. The results support these studies and suggest that orientation of employees with customer centric approach mediate the effect of employee satisfaction and commitment in achieving customer's satisfaction. Studies also support that communication gap between organizations and employee reduces the organization's overall efficiency to achieve its goal and employee orientation. Effective communication enhances employee's understanding towards their organizations requirement and thus performs accordingly.

5. Conclusion :

Employees are the key assets of the organization responsible for the successful positioning in the competitive market landscape. Similarly, customers are the profitable market-

share for the organization and their rejection or acceptance enunciates the success of the firm. The results from data analysis indicate that employee satisfaction directly affects the customer satisfaction, while highly committed employees require orientation programs that give them a clear idea of organization's goal and objectives. However, such orientation requires an effective and clear and transparent communication between the organization and the employees so that they can be aware of organization's goals and objectives and thereby act accordingly.

When an organization strategically plans to influence customer satisfaction, it requires a customer-centric orientation of front-line employees since they are the representative and the direct medium of influence that affects customer's overall evaluation of the firm/organization. The study therefore, provides a holistic view of hospitality industry for managerial implications towards employee management and its relationship with customer satisfaction. Managers focusing towards employee management dimensions like employee satisfaction and commitment towards the organization can achieve customer satisfaction by influencing customer orientation. The study indicates that a higher level of satisfaction and commitment among employees motivates them to orient according to their organizational desire, which in many cases reflects customer orientation. The management needs to communicate the organizational objectives and a requirement of customer-friendly approach to their employees. This helps in building a highly skilled customer-friendly employee staff able to influence the customer's satisfaction by delivering them the best of their ability service.

6. Limitation

This study considers employee satisfaction and commitment as the major influencer of customer orientation of the front-line employees. Dimensions like employee loyalty, designation, work-environment may also influence employee orientation. Also, the study represents the viewpoint of private sector of hospitability industry which cannot be generalized to other industry and sector. The results may vary from organizational level, across hierarchies along with demographic and geographical variables.

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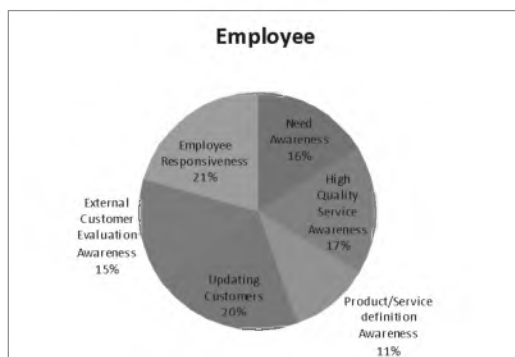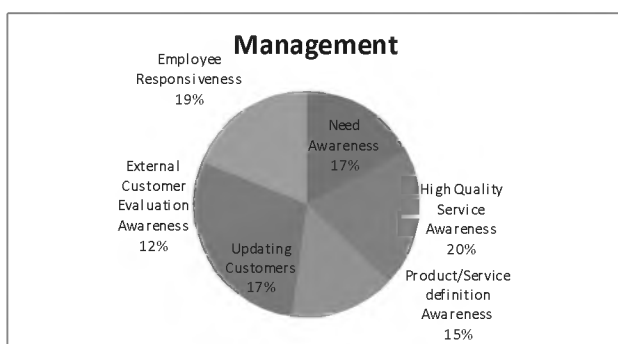
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