SECTION 3. General issues in management

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Call centre ease of communication in customer service delivery: an asset to managing customers' needs?

Abstract

The customer service experience has been equated to a business tsunami as customers switch to those companies that offer greater customer satisfaction. It becomes the task of the firm's call centre to cradle customer interaction and loyalty through ease and speed of access, quality and ease of communication with call centre agents. This study was undertaken in Durban, South Africa, and was conducted within a Public Sector service environment presenting a twofold agent and customer perspective of how service delivery could be harnessed through ease of communication. The Public Sector service environment comprised of four major call centres employing a total of 240 call centre agents. A sample of 151 call centre agents was drawn using cluster sampling and a 63% response rate was achieved. These call centre agents were responsible for inbound calls only. Using simple random sampling, 220 customers were drawn from all consumers subscribing to e-billing in Durban. Data for both samples were collected using self-developed, precoded questionnaires whose psychometric properties were statistically determined. Data were analyzed using descriptive and inferential statistics. The results indicate that the influence of ease of communication between call centre agents and customers has the potential to impact on improved call centre effectiveness and that improved levels of service delivery can enhance communication between them creating greater synergy and enhanced service experience whilst augmenting call centre effectiveness. Based on the results of the study recommendations have been made to better manage customers and their needs more competently and constructively.

Keywords: ease of communication, service excellence, service retention, service delivery, loyalty to customers.
JEL Classification: M39.

Introduction

Customer service is the capability of employees with the right knowledge and enthusiasm to deliver goods and services to both internal and external customers in a way that brings about satisfaction of their needs and, consequently, results in favorable word-of-mouth communication and repeat business (Lucas, 2005). A critical marketing activity is developing products and services that are able to satisfy consumers' needs and wants. Consumer research is able to provide answers to what a consumer is looking for in terms of the core product attributes, the advertising media that are likely to have the greatest impact, as well as prices of the product (Hoyer & MacInnis, 2001).

According to Lucas (2005), there has been a shift to the service economy and some of the factors contributing to this are the increased efficiency in technology where activities like telemarketing and internet shopping have evolved and continue to expand. Education also impacts hugely on customer service as customers are well informed on price, quality and value of products and services and,

therefore, have a high expectation of the quality of service received. The last decade has also seen a drastic growth in E-commerce and the way customers conduct business via the Internet from shopping to surfing the net for information on goods and services. This trend has placed an increasing demand on the creators of these innovative sites to provide a greater degree of service to customers without physically coming into contact with them.

The customer service employee. Several researchers highlight specific critical skills that customer service employees should possess, namely, coming to work regularly, being on time and never keeping customers waiting, taking pride in work, displaying confidence (Theron, Bothma & Du Toit, 2003) and maintaining a positive mental attitude (Cavvitt, 2010), being affable and knowledgeable so as to be able to diffuse a tense situation, especially if the other person is being rude or is angry (Brown, 2007; Cavitt, 2010; Snow, 2007), being interested and able to listen carefully to the problem and taking responsibility to resolve it (Snow, 2007) so as to bring about superstar service (Cavitt, 2010) and following up with the customer to ensure outcome satisfaction. A good employee will have to know when to say "NO" and to stick by a particular outcome. Brown (2007) believes that it is not always possible to say "YES" to all customer requests but one should avoid saying "NO" and rather opt to say "I will see what I can do" instead.

Hoffman and Bateson (2006) have uncovered seven categories that they classify as unsavory behavior from front line staff, namely, apathy, brush-off, coldness, condescension, robotism, rulebook and the run-around approach. LeClaire (2000) and Vikesland (2002) found that in order to cope with negative employees management must offer to assist the employee either through training or by enquiring about the cause of the negativity but staff that already possess a negative attitude should be motivated to change their behavior. It is not always easy to find the right front line personnel. In many instances the wrong people are placed in the 'firing line' when they do not want to be there and are really not interested in customers, leaving the customer very disgruntled.

Doing it right the first time. According to Blem (1995), in an attempt to increase productivity many firms have focused on two important questions being: How can we do it faster? How can we do it cheaper? But many fail to answer a third basic question of 'How can we do it right the first time?' The key to higher productivity lies in working better rather than faster. The payoffs for improving quality by doing things right the first time include lower costs (materials, inspection and repairs), worker pride (positive feelings of confidence and success that come from mastering a job) and customer loyalty. With regard to customer loyalty, research suggests that customers demand quality and not price in the purchase of goods and services (Blem, 1995; Brown, 2007; Cavitt, 2010). In this regard, Blem (1995, p. 51) believes that "The bitterness of poor quality lingers long after the sweetness of a cheap price is forgotten".

Dealing with customers on the phone. Many business owners make and receive telephone calls on an ongoing basis but not many employees have professional telephone skills to make that first impression. Theron et al. (2003) and Ward (2010) identified specific collective weaknesses displayed by employees using a telephone, namely, they cannot be heard, understood and cut the customer off when transferring them, they speak down to customers, use jargon, put customers on indefinite hold, pass the buck to another person or department to solve the problem, provide misleading or erroneous information and may be rude. When these telephone *faux pas* occur, consumers will be left irate. Employees must realize that every time they receive a call, they are the company to the other person on the line. Obviously a warm, friendly, sincere, courteous and tactful voice will make the customer's experience a positive one (Obarski, 2010). Since visual cues are not present in a telephone conversation, employees have to harness their listening skills. Front line staff has to sound reassuring, interested and willing to help.

It is essential for all telephonists or call centre agents to work out a telephone script which they can use to answer the phone. A script is a list of pre-prepared statements that a person can use when answering a call. For example, to welcome a caller, enquire what their problem is, direct the caller to a specific person, clarify a point or end the conversation.

Researchers have highlighted specific key areas of focus in terms of how to improve an employee's professional telephone skills. These include getting ready and having paper and pen at hand and necessary forms to record all necessary information legibly (Obarski, 2010), putting on a smiling telephone face and being energetic (Theron et al., 2003), answering the phone quickly (on or before the third ring or in bigger environments within thirty seconds) (Ward, 2010), ensuring the three part greeting (agent's name, company/department and an effective greeting) as identifying oneself enables the customer to reference his/her call with the agent later (Bailey & Leland, 2008; Obarski, 2010), speaking clearly, naturally and distinctly and not robotically, listening (for at least seventy percent of the time and speak for thirty percent of the time), asking questions related to the query to find a solution (Obarski, 2010) and asking for the customer's name early in the conversation especially if referral is needed (Ward, 2010). It is also important for the agent to brief the new agent when transferring calls so that the customer does not have to repeat himself/herself again (Bailey & Leland, 2008), to take responsibility for the problem and do follow-ups, to be polite and thoughtful so as gain the trust and goodwill of all people and have a facts and frequently asked questions (FAQs) database at hand (Timm, 2008).

In the case of call centres, when a customer calls the company's care line or help desk the call is automatically logged on a computer as is the conversation. The operator records the customers' name, contact details and problem onto special software. According to Theron et al. (2003), the agent may be able to help the customer immediately or may refer the customer. When customers dial into a call centre their calls can also be answered by an automated service called an Interactive Voice Response facility (known as IVR), welcoming them to the company's call centre. This IVR will inform the customer that their call is important and to please be patient in waiting for the next available agent. In the meantime, the customer has the option to listen to promotional deals or other offerings made by the firm (IBM, 2007). Many consumers find the waiting tedious and frustrating and believe that options that are offered do not cater for their specific needs. Another common frustration is that there is a lack of

consistency when calling a call centre as you do not know which agent will receive your call and if this agent is efficient. Certain operators are trained to handle certain types of queries; this is the main purpose behind the menu options in an IVR system so that the customer is channelled to the right agents. Interestingly, Theron et al. (2003) have noted a marked increase in call centres in South Africa but emphasizes that the country is falling short in terms of the people skills needed to implement and run such centres and the database technologies necessary to offer customer personalization. This brings up a pivotal point in the discussion on striving for customer excellence which looks into how a service organization can get its staff to give off their best at all times. In other words, understanding what characteristics staff perceive as appealing incentives to strive harder towards achieving the goals of the organization.

Empowerment. There is much debate about the empowerment for service personnel. This simply entails giving the front line service responsibility to act for themselves with the support of service managers (Armistead & Clarke, 1992; Schindlholzer, 2008) such that staff is allowed to act spontaneously to fully meet customers' needs (Schindlholzer, 2008). Managers may enjoy this course of action as they see themselves supporting rather than directing activities. Empowerment, however, should be viewed from the individual's perspective as some may see it as a threat to their job security, while others may see it as a motivator in the Hertzberg sense. Autocratic firms may not appreciate empowerment but firms with a strong service team may give support to the individuals, thereby strengthening the trust between members of the team and between the team and the service managers.

Burnout. According to Bailey and Leland (2008), numerous jobs that involve dealing with customer complaints are amongst the most stressful. This stress is as a result of constant pressure, mental exhaustion and physical strain and if left unchecked, can result in burnout. Symptoms of burnout include feeling powerless, hopeless, emotionally exhausted, isolated, irritable, frustrated and trapped. Burnout worsens slowly with time and follows four distinct phases (Bailey and Leland, 2008).

♦ Exhaustion: Includes feeling overwhelmed. Staff members lose control of their schedule and feel mentally and physically drained.
♦ Uncertainty: Due to sheer exhaustion one is forced to cut corners; one's vulnerability and insecurity surfaces.
♦ Abrasiveness: One is afraid to show what one is experiencing at work and, thus, tends to alienate oneself from family and colleagues with sarcastic and cynical attitudes.

♦ Failure: By the time one gets to this phase all one's inner defences have worn down. One becomes ultra-sensitive and innocent remarks can cause one to take offense and over-react angrily.

It is also imperative to guard against burnout arising as a result of the work elements of monotony and the routine nature of the job associated with operations within the call centre. It is often a challenging task to keep staff motivated on a regular basis. Due to the monotonous and routine nature of work, the turnover rate within call centres is often high. Fluss (2010) suggests that Interactive Voice Response and Web Self-Service can be implemented so that customers are able to handle largely routine queries on their own. This leaves the more exciting and challenging queries for agents to handle; thereby, reducing the monotony. In addition Fluss (2010) also suggests engaging in 'buzz sessions' which are normally about fifteen minutes in duration and are facilitated by the team leader in order to re-motivate his/her team members. Regular training can also help to overcome the monotony.

World Class call centres are those which adopt state-of-the-art technology and all the effective systems for quick processing of inbound and outbound calls. This technology also facilitates the capturing and processing of essential customer information which is useful for market research, branding and other strategies (Suite 101.com, 2009). Aside from all of the qualities that have already been highlighted thus far in the study, another important attribute of employees is the need for multilingual agents. In a global market environment customers speak different languages and agents, especially in South Africa, should be fluent in English, Afrikaans and a few of the other official languages spoken in South Africa (Suite 101.com, 2009).

Customer perceptions of services. Most practitioners use the terms quality and satisfaction interchangeably but researchers stressed the need for greater precision (Lovelock, 2001; Wilson, Zeithaml, Bitner & Gremler, 2008; Zeithaml, Bitner & Gremler, 2006). Zeithaml and Bitner (2003) suggest that although there are certain common characteristics between the two, satisfaction should be seen as a broader concept, whereas service quality focuses specifically on dimensions of service; therefore, perceived service quality is a component of customer satisfaction. In addition, Lovelock (2001) argues that perceived service quality is one component of customer satisfaction; there are others such as price–quality tradeoffs and personal and situational factors. Zeithaml and Bitner (2003) argue that service quality is a

focused evaluation that reflects a customer's perception of elements of services such as interaction, quality, physical environment quality and outcome quality and these elements are then evaluated based on service quality dimensions as stipulated in the SERVQUAL model, namely, reliability, assurance, responsiveness, empathy and tangibles.

What determines customer satisfaction? Zeithaml et al. (2006) and Wilson et al. (2008) suggest that customer satisfaction is influenced by customer emotions (mood, state or life satisfaction), product/ service features, attributions for service success or failure, perceptions of equity and fairness and other consumers, family members and co-workers. However, a service failure can occur for all kinds of reasons, such as the unavailability of the service promised, or late or slow delivery of the service. Nonetheless, these service failures instil a negative feeling or response in the customers. Ignoring a service failure is dangerous and can lead to the customers leaving or engaging in negative word-of-mouth communications as already highlighted (Hoffman et al., 1995). It is, therefore, beneficial to ensure effective service recovery as this can be critical in restoring customer satisfaction. According to Zeithaml et al. (2006, p. 214), "service recovery refers to the actions taken by an organization in response to a service failure". Tax and Brown (2000) and Hess, Ganesan and Klein (2003) have shown that a well enacted service recovery performance can help to overcome customer disappointment and anger and can even salvage a relationship.

Mattila and Cranage (2005) highlight that service failure is inevitable due to human frailties, especially in high contact services. Managers are critically aware that recovering from such failures is essential for customer retention; the challenge, however, is how to achieve this effectively (Hoffman, Kelley & Rotalsky, 1995). Mattila and Cranage (2005) explored the possibility of allowing the customer to exercise some choice over the delivery of some components of the service. In order for the provider to gain a competitive advantage, customers were encouraged to be co-producers of the service. They agree that giving customers some control of the service process can be viewed as customer participation in service production. In this way, should service failure arise then the customer should share part of the responsibility for the failure (Mattila & Cranage, 2005). In this regard, Benapudi and Leone (2003) found that offering people a choice to co-produce a service led to higher satisfaction levels when the outcome was worse than expected.

Several researchers suggest particular service recovery strategies can be adopted by a service provider who has experienced a service failure. These include encouraging and tracking complaints by administering satisfaction surveys, engaging in critical incident studies, toll free call centres, e-mail and pagers (Hoffman, Bateson, Wood & Kenyon, 2009; Wilson et al., 2008; Zeithaml et al., 2006), acting quickly by having system and self-help procedures in place to facilitate quick action and empowering staff to handle complaints quickly before it escalates out of control (Schindlholzer, 2008), by making the service 'fail safe' by 'doing it right the first time' (Zeithaml et al., 2006) and adopting the TQM notion of poka yokes to improve reliability and quality control (Wilson et al., 2008), by providing adequate, factual, vital information/ explanations for a service failure, by treating customers fairly, by cultivating relationships with customers (Hess et al., 2003; Ashley & Varki, 2009), by tracking service recovery efforts and solutions and learning from recovery experiences (Schindlholzer, 2008; Wilson et al., 2008) and by learning from lost customers through market research. Undoubtedly, service recovery strategies are critical to customer satisfaction. Hence, every effort must be made to ensure that services are executed with precision in order to build stronger, loyal ties with customers.

Customer retention. According to Hoyer and McInnis (2001), Hoffman and Bateson (2006) and Baldwin (2007), the concept of customer retention refers to focusing the organization's marketing efforts toward the existing customer base. Instead of seeking new customers, firms are now engaged in customer retention efforts to work with and satisfy existing customers with the aim of building long term relationships between the firm and its current clientele for the purpose of growing the business (Hoyer & McInnis, 2001; Rust, Zahorik & Keiningham, 1996).

Marketers have reacted to this new environment of brand parity and non-brand loyalty by choosing to chase new customers. This term is referred to as conquest marketing (Hoffman & Bateson, 2006). Typical incentives offered during conquest marketing include discounts and markdowns and due to the customers' lack of brand loyalty the results obtained through conquest marketing are enjoyed only in the short term. Many firms experience tremendous growth rates in terms of their customer base but due to this acceleration they are not able to handle consumer queries and complaints efficiently and hence, in the long term tend to lose customers as a result of poor service (Rust et al., 1996).

Hoffman and Bateson (2006) concur that customer retention has become increasingly important due to changes in the marketing environment. A few reasons for customer retention are due to the increase in

competition which include the relative parity and lack of differential advantage of goods and services on the market, deregulated industries that compete for customers in an open market, the growth of online alternatives and accessible market information that is available to more firms (Gonzalez, 2008).

Added to the importance of customer retention is the fact that marketing practices are becoming very expensive, especially mass marketing which is the primary tool being used by conquest marketers. There have also been marked changes in the firm's distribution channels being used. In many cases, the physical distance between producer and consumer is increasing. Transactions can be undertaken by phone or mail order and the internet thereby limiting physical contact further (Gonzalez, 2008). Another change in the channel of distribution is the use of third parties to assist in the transactions between the firm and its customer. Although the use of third parties can expand a firm's market coverage, it can also adversely affect retention rates due to poor performance.

Consumers today are more informed, command more discretionary income and are sceptical about the firm's concern for their business; so, naturally, firms engaged in retention practices are usually noticed by today's consumers. Since customers cannot be held captive, the only way to prevent defections is to outperform competitors continuously. This can be done through soliciting feedback from defecting customers so that the firm is able to continually improve service delivery (Reichheld & Sasser, 1990) by 'managing for zero defects', whereby every effort is made by firms to retain loyal customers through service perfection.

Numerous benefits have been cited for building and maintaining stronger existing relationships with customers, namely, profits derived from sales, especially repeat sales (Gonzalez, 2008; Lake, 2010), profits from reduced operating costs as the 'Pareto Principle' show that it costs three to five times less to keep a customer than to get a new one (Schiffman & Kanuk, 2004) and since old customers are more receptive to the firm's marketing efforts (Ashley & Varki, 2009) and profits from referrals (Hoffman & Bateson, 2006; Reichheld & Sasser, 1990).

Aim of the study. This study aims to assess the influence of ease of communication between call centre agents and customers in the customer service delivery process in managing customers' needs.

1. Research design

1.1. Respondents. The study encompasses two perspectives on the ease of communication in the customer service delivery process, namely, a call

centre agents' perspective and a customer perspective. The population for the call centre agents' perspective comprised of 239 call centre agents employed by this Public Service organization within its four call centres in the Durban area. Using Sekaran's (2003) population-to-sample size table, a corresponding minimum sample of 148 was needed, thereby confirming the adequacy of the sample of 151 call centre agents. The probability sampling technique of cluster sampling was used. According to Sekaran (2003), in cluster sampling, groups or chunks of elements that have heterogeneity among members within each group are chosen for study. The adequacy of the sample was determined using the Kaiser-Meyer-Olkin Measure of Sampling Adequacy (0.676) and the Bartlet's Test of Spherecity (341.302, $p = 0.000$) which, respectively, indicated suitability and significance. The results indicate that the normality and homoscedasticity preconditions are satisfied. The e-billing population of customers for the customer questionnaire comprised of 1847 customers in the Durban area. Using Sekaran's (2003) population-to-sample size table, a corresponding minimum sample of 317 was needed; however, only 220 responses were received. Probability sampling technique was used and simple random sampling was adopted for customers. The adequacy of the sample was determined using the Kaiser-Meyer-Olkin Measure of Sampling Adequacy (0.895) and the Bartlet's Test of Spherecity (2116.244, $p = 0.000$) which, respectively, indicated suitability and significance. The results indicate that the normality and homoscedasticity preconditions are satisfied.

In terms of the composition of the sample of call centre agents, there were more females (57%) than males (43%). The majority of the sample were between 20-29 years (67.5%), followed by 30-39 years (20.5%) and then 40-49 years (10.6%), thereby indicating that the sample is predominantly young, which is typical of employment in a call centre environment. Black agents constituted the majority (55.6%), followed by Indian (25.2%), Coloured (15.9%) and then White (3.3%) employees. The majority of the agents were in service for 1-3 years (51.7%) with more or less an equal distribution of years of service in the other categories (1-11 months, 4-6 years and, 7 years and over). The majority of the agents have a high school qualification (56.3%) followed by those with a diploma (36.4%), whilst only 7.3% has a degree. More agents are employed on a full-time (66.2%) as opposed to a part-time basis (33.8%).

In terms of call variables, the majority of agents take an average of 100-109 calls a day (21.2%), followed by 70-79 calls a day (19.9%), have a waiting time (length of time a customer waits on the line before

his/her call is answered by an agent) of 0-5 minutes (55.6%), have an abandonment rate (number of callers that eventually disconnect) of 0-5% (86.1%), secure a talk time (duration of call) of 0-5 minutes (84.2%), a wrap-up time of 0-5 minutes (98.7%) and report a queue time of 0-5 minutes (96.7%).

In terms of the composition of the customer sample the majority of the respondents were males (55%) compared to females (45%). The majority of the sample were between the ages of 40-49 years (30%) followed by 30-39 years (28.6%) and then 50-59 years (19.5%). Whites were the majority respondents of the customer questionnaire comprising 50.5% of the sample followed by Indians (32.7%) and then Blacks (13.2%). The majority of the respondents reported having a Diploma (34.1%) followed by those with a degree (26.4%) and a high school education (21.4%).

1.2. Measuring instrument. Data for both the call centre agents and their customers were collected using self-developed, pre-coded, self administered questionnaires consisting of two sections. In terms of the call centre agents' questionnaire Section A dealt purely with the biographical (gender, age, race, tenure, education and employment status) and operational data of call centre agents. Section B tapped into agent's perceptions of the ease of communication in managing customers and their needs. Whilst Section A was nominally scaled with precoded option categories, Section B required respondents to rate each item using the Likert Scale ranging from strongly disagree (1) to strongly agree (5). Likewise for the Customer questionnaire Section A dealt with the biographical details (gender, age, race, education) of consumers participating in the study and was nominally scaled with precoded option categories. Section B related to ease of communication, tapping into customers' expectations of service delivery, service excellence, service retention and perceptions of agents' loyalty to customers, Section B required respondents to rate each item using the Likert scale ranging from strongly disagree (1) to strongly agree (5). Both questionnaires were formulated on the basis of identifying recurring themes that surfaced while conducting the literature review. These ensured face and content validity. Furthermore, in-house pretesting was adopted to assess the suitability of both the instruments. Pilot testing was also carried out on twenty call centre agents to test the appropriateness of questions and their understanding thereof. Pilot testing was also executed on the customer questionnaire to test the understanding of questions. No inadequacies were reported and the final questionnaires were considered appropriate in terms of relevance and construction.

1.3. Research procedure. The research was only conducted after ethical clearance was obtained for the study and upon completion of the pilot study.

1.4. Measures/statistical analysis of the questionnaire. The validity of the agents' questionnaire was assessed using Factor Analysis. A principal component analysis was used to extract initial factors and an iterated principle factor analysis was performed using SPSS with an Orthogonal Varimax Rotation. In terms of the validity, the 10 items loaded significantly to generate one factor with a factor loading greater than unity, namely, ease of communication (Factor loading = 3.079). The items were also reflected as having a prudent level of internal consistency and reliability, with the overall Cronbach's Coefficient Alpha being 0.695 with item reliabilities ranging from 0.640 to 0.710.

The validity of the customers' questionnaire was also assessed using Factor Analysis. A principal component analysis was used to extract initial factors and an iterated principle factor analysis was performed using SPSS with an Orthogonal Varimax Rotation. In terms of validity 4 critical components were identified in managing customers and their needs with factor loadings greater than unity (service retention based on communication, Factor loading = = 7.490; service excellence based on communication, Factor loading = 2.136; Loyalty to customers in terms of communication, Factor loading = 1.136 and service delivery in terms of communication, Factor loading = 1.015). The items were also reflected as having a very high level of internal consistency and reliability with Cronbach's Coefficient Alpha being 0.888 with item reliabilities ranging from 0.876 to 0.896.

1.5. Administration of the measuring instrument. The agents' survey was confined to the call centre agents employed within the four call centre's in Durban, South Africa. The customer questionnaire was restricted to only those customers that subscribed to e-billing and had an email account. The online survey was administered to a sample of call centre agents and customers within the Durban region, South Africa using QuestionPro. Both agents and customers, respectively, were required to completely answer Sections A and B of the respective questionnaire and then submit their responses via QuestionPro return mail. Informed consent was obtained by an authorization letter that accompanied both sets of questionnaires. All participation was voluntary.

1.6. Statistical analysis of the data. Descriptive statistics (mean, measures of central tendency and dispersion) and inferential statistics (correlation,

t-test, ANOVA) were used to evaluate the objectives and hypotheses for both questionnaires.

2. Results

2.1. Ease of communication between agents and customers: agents' perspective. Agents' perception

of the ease of communication in managing customers and their needs effectively were evaluated using a 1-5 point Likert scale. The higher the mean score value, the more satisfied agents are with the communication between customers and themselves (Table 1).

Table 1. Descriptive statistics – agent's perspective of ease of communication between customers and themselves

Sub-dimension	Mean	Std deviation	Minimum	Maximum
Ease of communication between agent and customer	3.4815	0.5278	1.70	5.00

Table 1 shows that agents hold fair to good (Mean = = 3.4815) perceptions of the ease of communication between customers and themselves in bringing about call centre effectiveness. However, against the maximum attainable score of 5, it is evident that there is room for improvement in communication between the agent and the customer.

In order to assess the areas of improvement, mean analyses were conducted. In terms of the ease of communication between the agent and customer, 61.6% of the agents disagreed that customers are always polite. Furthermore, 19.2% of the agents believed that customers do not always furnish them with adequate information to assist them with their query/complaint immediately. A further

23.9%% of the agents disagreed that customers are very cooperative when talking to them. This is an indication that communication lines between agents and customers are not always quick and easy.

2.2. Influence of biographical data: agents. The influence of the biographical variables (age, race, tenure, gender and employment status) on agents' perceptions of the ease of communication between customers and themselves was assessed (Table 2).

Hypothesis 1: Agents varying in biographical profiles (age, race, tenure, educational qualifications, gender, employment status) significantly differ in their perceptions of the ease of communication, between customers and themselves, needed for effectively managing customers and their needs.

Table 2. Biographical profiles of agents and ease of communication between customers and agents

ANOVA								
Dimension	Biographical variable							
	Age		Race		Tenure		Educational qualification	
	F	p	F	p	F	P	F	p
Ease of communication between customers and agents	1.345	0.264	2.469	0.064	1.057	0.369	1.283	0.280
t-test								
Dimension	Biographical variable							
	Gender				Employment status			
	T		p		T		p	
Ease of communication between customers and agents	0.623		0.534		1.226		0.222	

Table 2 indicates that agents varying in biographical profiles (age, race, tenure, educational qualifications, gender, employment status) do not differ significantly in their perceptions of ease of communication, between customers and themselves, needed for effectively managing customers and their needs. Hypothesis 1 may, therefore, be rejected.

2.3. Ease of communication between agents and customers: customers' perspective. Customers' perceptions of the ease of communication between agents and themselves were evaluated using a 1-5 point Likert scale. The higher the mean score value, the more satisfied customers are with the ease of communication between agents and themselves (Table 3).

Table 3. Descriptive statistics: customers' perceptions of the ease of communication between agents and themselves

Sub-dimension of ease of communication	Mean	Std dev.	Minimum	Maximum
Delivery of service in terms of communication	2.9297	0.6939	1.00	5.00
Service excellence based on communication	2.6402	0.7792	1.00	5.00
Service retention based on communication	2.3607	0.7948	1.00	5.00

Table 3 (cont.). Descriptive statistics: customers' perceptions of the ease of communication between agents and themselves

Sub-dimension of ease of communication	Mean	Std dev.	Minimum	Maximum
Loyalty to customers in terms of communication	3.5194	0.6500	1.00	5.00
Overall score on ease of communication	2.8625	0.5845	1.00	5.00

Customers' perceptions of the ease of communication between agents and themselves were assessed in terms of four sub-dimensions, which in decreasing level of satisfaction as reflected in Table 3 are:

♦ Loyalty to customers in terms of communication (Mean = 3.5194).
♦ Delivery of service in terms of communication (Mean = 2.9297).
♦ Service excellence based on communication (Mean = 2.6402).
♦ Service retention based on communication (Mean = 2.3607).

The overall score indicates a moderate level of satisfaction (Mean = 2.8625) with ease of communication between agents and customers. Against the maximum attainable score of 5, it is evident that there is room for improvement in terms of all of the sub-dimensions of communication in managing customers and their needs.

In order to assess the areas for improvement, frequency analyses were conducted on each of the sub-dimensions. In terms of delivery of service, 50.5% of the customers were not convinced that the information and level of service they receive from the call centre is always reliable and 56.3% disagreed that they prefer to use the call centre because it is easy to access and make contact with an agent.

In terms of the sub-dimension of service excellence, 53.2% of the customers disagreed that the firm always strives to exceed the customers' expectations of them in terms of service delivery based on communication.

Furthermore, 49.1% of the customers were not convinced that the call centre communicates assurances that the firm is dedicated to ensuring their satisfaction.

In terms of the sub-dimension of service retention, 60.4% of the customers disagreed that the compensation that was communicated to them for inferior service was fair and equitable. Furthermore, 58.2% of the customers were not convinced that the call centre of the firm communicates good incentives to them to keep doing business with the firm.

In terms of the sub-dimension of loyalty to customers, 30.4% of the customers disagreed that a service failure in terms of ineffective communication will not cause them to terminate doing business with the firm in future. Furthermore, 22.2% of the customers disagreed that if their query/complaint is not resolved favorably then they are inclined to switch to another service provider. This could mean that due to a lack of competitors in the public service, customers are forced to maintain business relationships with the firm even in the event of poor communication and poor quality services being received.

2.4. Intercorrelations amongst the critical components of ease of communication: customers. *Hypothesis 2:* There exist significant intercor-relations amongst the critical components relating to communication (delivery of service, service excellence, service retention and loyalty) as expected by customers in their interactions with call centre agents who manage their needs (Table 4).

Table 4. Pearson correlation (r): intercorrelations of the critical components of ease of communication
(N = 220)

Critical ingredient	r/p	Delivery of service	Service excellence	Service retention	Loyalty to customers
Delivery of service in terms of communication	r	1			
Service excellence based on communication	r p	0.708 0.000**	1		
Service retention based on communication	r p	0.667 0.000**	0.798 0.000**	1	
Loyalty to customers in terms of communication	r p	0.374 0.000**	0.280 0.000**	0.208 0.000**	1

Note: **p < 0.01.

Table 4 indicates that the critical components expected by customers in their interactions with call centre agents significantly intercorrelate with each other at the 1% level of significance. Therefore, hypothesis 2 may be accepted. Table 4 reflects strong relationships between service

excellence and delivery of service relating to communication (r = 0.708) and service retention based on communication (r = 0.798), respectively. The significant intercorrelations between the critical components of ease of communication indicate that if communication is enhanced in all aspects

of interaction with the consumer, it will have a positive snowballing and rippling effect on perceived dedication to customers, service delivery and excellence thereby encouraging customer retention.

2.5. Influence of biographical variables: customers. The influence of the biographical variables (age, race, gender and education) on custo-

mers' perceptions of the sub-dimensions of ease of communication was assessed (Table 5-6).

Hypothesis 3: Customers varying in biographical variables (age, race, gender and education) significantly differ in their perceptions of the sub-dimensions of ease of communication (service delivery, service excellence, service retention, loyalty to customers), respectively.

Table 5. Biographical variables and the customers' perceptions of the sub-dimensions of ease of communication

ANOVA						
Sub-dimensions of ease of communication	Biographical variable					
	Age		*Race*		*Educational qualification*	
	F	p	F	p	F	p
Delivery of service	1.226	0.301	1.278	0.283	0.149	0.930
Service excellence	3.154	0.015	0.132	0.941	0.575	0.632
Service retention	0.725	0.575	0.361	0.781	0.289	0.834
Loyalty to customers	1.604	0.174	0.136	0.938	0.331	0.803
t-test						
Sub-dimensions of ease of communication	Biographical variable					
	Gender					
	T		p			
Delivery of service	-0.533		0.595			
Service excellence	-1.302		0.194			
Service retention	-2.087		0.038			
Loyalty to customers	-0.495		0.621			

Table 5 indicates that customers varying in biographical profiles (age, race and educational qualifications) do not differ significantly in their perceptions of the sub-dimensions of ease of communication, except for the influence of age on

perceptions of service excellence. Hypothesis 3 may, therefore, be partially accepted. In order to assess where these significant differences lie with regards to age, mean differences were analyzed and the Post-hoc Scheffe's test conducted (Table 6).

Table 6. Age – mean differences

Sub-dimension of ease of communication	Age categories	N	Mean	Std. dev.
Service excellence	20-29	12	2.9000	0.75559
	30-39	63	2.5048	0.85070
	40-49	66	2.4727	0.64368
	50-59	43	2.8977	0.81693
	60 and over	36	2.7778	0.73877
	Total	220	2.6382	0.77801
Post hoc Scheffe's test: age and service excellence				
Sub-dimension	Age (I)	Age (J)	Mean difference (I-J)	p
Service excellence	40-49	20-29 50-59	-0.42495*	0.005

Table 6 indicates that 20-29 year old consumers (Mean = 2.9000) have a strong appreciation for the fact that their queries are handled promptly, that the firm invites them to participate in customer satisfaction surveys and takes initiatives to exceed customer expectations of service delivery. Their appreciation is closely mirrored by the 50-59 year olds (Mean = 2.8977) who appreciate the fact that call centres strive to resolve queries or complaints favorably and that assurances are given by these call centres of a dedication to customer satisfaction.

However, employees between 40-49 years hold contrary views in terms of service excellence based on perceived communication and rate the service of agents as being moderate (Mean = 2.4727).

2.6. Correlation between customers' and agent's perspective of ease of communication in managing customers and their needs. *Hypothesis 4:* There is a significant relationship between customers' and agents' perceptions of ease of communication in managing customers and their needs (Table 7).

Table 7. Pearson correlation: customers' (N = 220) and agents' (N = 151) perceptions of ease
of communication in managing customers and their needs

Customers' perceptions	r/p	Agents' perceptions
Ease of communication	r = 0.060 p = 0.465	Ease of communication

Table 7 indicates that there is no significant relationship between customers' and agents' perceptions of ease of communication in managing customers and their needs. Hence, Hypothesis 4 may be rejected. The descriptive statistics verifies this outcome as customers have a more negative perspective of the ease of communication between them and agents (Mean = 2.8625) than the perspective that agents hold (Mean = 3.4814).

3. Discussion of results

In terms of agents' perceptions of the ease of communication between the agent and the customer, the study showed that communication lines between agents and customers are not always quick and easy. Sawchuk's (2004) findings are similar to this and he reiterates in his study that agents are required to serve customers and not be abused by them and should attempt not to react to the provocation and remain calm at all times. A contrary view was that proposed by Anonymous (2003) who found that calling the call centre is a frustrating experience for customers. However, with the right training and development of agents in areas of responsiveness, listening skills, customer care and friendliness customers can enjoy better relations with agents and the firm.

In terms of the customers' perceptions of delivery of service based on communication of agents and call centre effectiveness, the study found that customers felt that the information and level of service that they received from the call centre is not always reliable and many also disagreed that they prefer to use the call centre because it was easy to access and make contact with an agent. Similarly, International Business Machines (IBM) (2007) undertook a study and found that if the self-service portals were designed and deployed effectively they could save the firm between 15 to 30% by redirecting contacts, reducing call volumes and automating assistance. Overall, IBM (2007) found that if implemented correctly self-service portals should provide users with quick and efficient information, portals must be interactive and should lower the firm's costs. Dean (2008) offers a contrary view to IBM's (2007) report and found that although self-service systems experienced rapid growth, numerous complaints were lodged against the system. The basis of IVR is speech recognition accuracy, and customers were experiencing recognition failures, and there was a

lack of choice to speak to human consultants which contributed to service failure. Adhikari (2009) proposed that to facilitate communication today, Facebook, Twitter and Social blogging can be implemented as new tools within firms as part of CRM strategies to foster better relationships with customers.

In terms of customers' perceptions of service excellence of agents and call centre effectiveness, the study found that customers disagreed that the firm always strives to exceed the customers' expectations of them in terms of service delivery and the call centre did not communicate to customers any assurances that the organization was dedicated to ensuring their satisfaction. Similar findings were obtained in studies by Zeithaml and Bitner (2003) which confirmed that customers seem to fall in the zone of tolerance, that is, the difference between the expected service and the experienced service (Parasuraman et al., cited in Zeithaml & Bitner, 2003). Conversely, Dean (2004), for an Australian call centre, found that there were high ratings for service quality attributes like adaptiveness, assurance, authority to solve problems by agents, lack of queues, empathy and friendliness by agents. There were very narrow zones of tolerance in call centre's meaning customers' expectations of adequate service perfor-mance are almost the same or close to their expectations of desired service performance (Jaiswal, 2008).

In terms of customers' perceptions of service retention based on communication of agents and call centre effectiveness, the study found that customers were displeased with the compensation that was communicated to them for inferior service and felt that it was not fair or equitable. Customers also felt that the call centre of the firm did not offer them good incentives to keep doing business with the firm. Similar findings by Lamb, Hair, McDaniel, Boshoff and Terbalanche (2004) and Lovelock (2001) suggest that a customer may choose to complain on the spot about poor service in which case the firm must respond immediately. Although customers can complain via telephone, in writing, via the internet or through the call centre, websites and blogs have also become popular avenues to voice customer dissatisfaction. Conversely, Zeithaml et al. (2006) postulate that consumers will only complain about high risk, expensive services. Ashley and Varki (2009) found that attitudinally loyal customers would be inclined to complain to the firm only if rewards

were to justify the efforts. The economic benefits would include continuing with the service that one has enjoyed in the past without switching to a new service provider.

In terms of customers' perceptions of loyalty of agents based on communication to customers and call centre effectiveness, the study found that customers disagreed that a service failure based on poor communication will not cause them to terminate doing business with the firm in the future. Furthermore, the study found that due to a lack of competitors in this particular service industry, customers were forced to maintain business relations with the firm in question even in case of poor service quality being received. Similar findings by Ashley and Varki (2009) suggest that loyal customers express greater satisfaction with service recovery efforts compared to less loyal customers when redress is offered. These results indicate that customers who complain may be among the firms' loyal customers and firms should monitor their loyalty programs more vigorously. Eisengerich and Bell (2006) found that while they define consumer loyalty as consumers' intent to stay with the organization, it has been noted that customers demand a role in production and in order to keep them satisfied firms must make provisions to allow for active customer participation. This participative behavior can reduce customer switching behavior and defections to other institutions.

Recommendations and conclusion

Ease of communication between agents and customers has the potential to contribute to greater customer satisfaction and retention in the long run. Customers were not very compliant when speaking to agents demonstrating that communication lines between agents and customers are challenging. Agents need to be enduring at all times as customers are always going to be demanding, especially if they have a grievance. Hence, it is important for agents to always remain unruffled and try to get as much information as possible out of the customer before endeavoring to assist. There are no rules when it comes to dealing with a customer as each situation is

distinctive and it depends on the agent's proficiency and their aptitude to remain professional under extreme pressure. Informal sessions where agents share their proficiencies with each other on how to manage challenging customers is very constructive and helpful, especially for new agents, just commencing their careers in the call centre. The research found that customers felt that the firm failed to meet their service expectations via the call centre. It is suggested that in order to manage this obvious gap between customer expectations of service and actual service experience, organizations in future need to revisit their entire customer service delivery process to address customer service quality. Customers expect quick response times, skilled agents and expedient service delivery processes. Organizations need to employ more agents to deal with the large customer database. The ratio of agents to customers is generally disproportionate in most call centres. It is recommended that organizations put into practice certain assurances that they are committed to customer satisfaction and that in case of service failure, they are committed to redress to ensure ultimate customer satisfaction. This serves to allay fears and serves as a guarantee to customers that the firm is committed to customer care in the long run.

Recommendations for future research

This study has been undertaken in one public service call centre and, hence, the results of the study have internal validity to this organization. In order to enhance generalizability, it would be useful to undertake a similar study in other call centre environments in a variety of service environments in both the Public and Private Sectors. This study also includes a call centre environment where only in-bound calls are made and, hence, it would be useful to assess similar dimensions in an out-bound call settings as speaking to someone who has chosen to interact with you is completely different from speaking to someone who was not expecting your interaction. Furthermore, it is valuable to assess the viability of open-plan offices in relation to the cognitive demand of the tasks of employees.

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