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Customer orientation: a service management cornerstone

Jean-Baptiste Suquet 1
&
Charles Stoessel 2

1 Associate Professor, Neoma Business School, IRG (Univ. Paris-Est Marne-la-Vallee)
2 Ph.D., Vice-President, Opus Citatum - Research & Consulting, 15, rue Denfert Rochereau, 93200 Saint-Denis, Paris, France

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Abstract: Quality of service is an important part of the firm competitiveness and a lot of marketing handbooks will remind you of the importance of "excellence" in service. But firms also have to be careful toward the "excellence of service" dogma. Research shows that the emphasis on customers' satisfaction can be so strong that it may reduce customer satisfaction! Three main mechanisms can explain that phenomenon: 1) boosted by their ambition of excellence in service, managers tend to get obsessed by customer satisfaction, which alters their ability to base their judgment on a realistic image of the organization; 2) customers expect too much from the brand. They listen carefully to the advertising campaigns, take all the promises for granted and wait for such a service quality that they may feel betrayed when something goes wrong; 3) the company focuses so strongly on the customer that it forgets its employees. Yet, good service is based on mutually satisfying interactions between a customer and a frontline employee - which requires a cheerful employee to make a pleased customer. The article explores the dangers of a "blind" total-customer-orientation and is based on a state-of-the-art review at the crossroads between service management and marketing literature (how to please the customer?) and sociology of services (is service a profound contemporary societal trend?). The paper tries to sketch a refined image of service management. Customers' satisfaction is clearly crucial, but it is not the only satisfaction at stake - and it is very important that service managers care for their staff as much as they do for customers. More broadly, we advocate for a global (and not narrowly marketing) approach to service management, and suggest avenues of collaborative thinking or action-research with practitioners in the hospitality sector.

Keywords: quality of service, customer, marketing, sociology of work, sociology of services

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Research & Innovation Center - Institut Lyfe

Château du Vivier - Ecully - France
Tel: +33 (0)4 72 18 02 20

Contact

Raphaëlle Mouillefarine
Partnerships Development
[Send an email](#)
+33 (0)4 26 20 97 63

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