DO YOU HAVE WHAT YOUR CUSTOMERS WANT?: AN EMPIRICAL STUDY OF TELECOMMUNICATION COMPANIES WEBSITES

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ABSTRACT

The emergence of Electronic Commerce (ecommerce) has brought tremendous yet significant changes to businesses particularly due to globalization pressure. More brick and mortar companies believe in the significant value of Internet-based transactions and realize the importance of doing businesses over the Internet. Companies realize the advantages of using the Internet for making online transactions especially for cost reduction and also improved customers' satisfaction. Electronic customer relationship management (eCRM) features are among the main factors that contribute to the success of any ecommerce Web sites. E-CRM programmes and implementations should focus on effectiveness of managing customer relations on the Internet through effective use of Internet features either to deliver updated and accurate information, allowing customer services support and providing personalized and value-added services. Thus, the aims of this research are to identify E-CRM features available on telecommunication Websites and customers' perceived importance of these features. The primary data for this research was collected through a questionnaire survey. The findings from this research showed that from the nine determinants identified, ease of use was ranked the most important feature in E-CRM. We discuss the limitations of this study and future directions of research.

INTRODUCTION

In an increasingly intense competition of the digital economy, more companies are rethinking ways to reduce costs and offering better quality products and services. This general industry trend has created tremendous cost pressures on traditional businesses. By far, both companies and consumers have acknowledged the Internet as an effective tool for disseminating information. From a marketing perspective the Internet is not just another marketing tool, but also a tool that can reach far to help companies understand customers better, to provide personalized services and to retain customers. Hence, the Internet technology is imperative in managing customer relationship for businesses in the digital economy.

Malaysian markets have recently begun to understand the importance of electronic customer relationship management (E-CRM) (Ab Hamid, 2008; Loh 2000). Primarily, the interest was led

by traditional customer management economics. It costs the industry five times as much to acquire a new customer than to retain an existing one; therefore, building long-term and sustainable customer relationships was a good strategy, from the point of view of both building life-time value relationships and the business cost savings involved (Peppers and Rogers 1996). Khatibi et. al., (2002) found that there is a positive trend of increasing awareness of the benefits of Internet marketing. Factors, such as global access and ubiquity, convenience, increased product information and availability of special services on the Internet were cited as possible means enhancing consumer satisfaction in cyberspace.

In service industry, transactions occur digitally through the Web site applications. Thus, Web sites play an important role to Internet-based businesses. A Web site is a medium for business transactions where trading parties especially which are the customers and companies itself has been given with advantages towards the technology usage. Moreover, a Web site can give customers a means to obtain information about products and services, buying and selling activities, transferring and exchanging products and many more. According to Turban et al. (2005), eCommerce involves products (consumer goods), and services (information services), traditional activities (healthcare, education) and new activities (virtual malls). Otherwise, the Web site can also provide the companies with the information about their customers.

Therefore, the need for Customer Relationship Management (CRM) and Electronic Customer Relationship Management (E-CRM) system has become a priority to integrate business processes and activities which related to sales, marketing and services, as well as enhancing communication and connection with the customers. However, the integration of the business process has the capability to assist the companies gain profits, increase customer loyalty and compete with others. Thus, the telecommunication companies ought to restructure the current electronic services and seeking for the E-CRM features to improve their Web site. As known, the determination of those E-CRM features will allow companies to focus on developing a better Web site.

This research aims to identify the extent to which telecommunication companies in Malaysia are maximizing the interactive features of Internet technology as a marketing tool and deliver superior service quality to their online customers. Premised on the belief that delighted customers are likely to return and become loyal to service providers, this study adopts the E-CRM features proposed by Feinberg and Kadam (2002) to empirically identify the E-CRM features and rank these features in the order of perceived importance to online customers.

E-SERVICE QUALITY AS A BUILDING BLOCK OF CUSTOMER RELATIONS

Businesses nowadays depend heavily to e-Business and e-Commerce in handling their business transactions and customers' affairs. In B2C e-commerce, e-services are important for managing customer relations and enhancing sales. Customers and businesses no longer meet face-to-face. The point of meetings, finding and exchanging information has reformed and the customers are more discerning with increased options and solutions available to them online. As customers embrace e-commerce their expectations ofservice, support, and how they make purchases are changing. Even so, quality of services expected to be delivered online are the same to what offline customers have.

Many researchers and practitioners posit that electronic services can be one of the key determinants in successful e-commerce ventures. According to Ruyter *et al* (2001), "An e-service is an interactive, content-centred and Internet-based customer service, driven by the customers and integrated with related organisational customer support processes and technologies with the goal of strengthening the customer-service provider relationship".

Now researchers and practitioners have shifted to redefine service quality to include the term 'electronic'. Van Riel et al defined e-Service Quality as the consumers' overall evaluation and judgment of the excellence and quality of e-service offerings in the virtual marketplace (2001). Besides that, elements of measurements have also been revised and proposed for some major frameworks that explain the theoretical concept of e-Service Quality. For example, Webb and Webb (2004) develop a measurement instrument of internet service quality, SITEQUAL, with four dimensions: ease of use, aesthetic design, processing speed, and security. Parasuraman et. al revised the SERVQUAL and proposed a new tool of assessing quality services online called E-S-QUAL. This tool is regarded as valuable for measuring the service quality delivered through companies' Web sites.

The comparison of the technical features of products is essentially costless, feasible, and easier than comparisons of products through traditional channels making service quality as key determinant for successful ecommerce (Santos, 2003). There are incubative and active dimensions of e-service quality have been proposed for increasing hit rates, stickiness, and customer retention. The incubative dimension consists of ease of use, appearance, linkage, structure and layout, and content. Meanwhile, the active dimension consists of reliability, efficiency, support, communication, security, and incentives.

For the purpose of this research, a model of e-service quality by Santos (2003) was adopted to ensure the reliability of the proposed model that will be the outcome of this research.. The definition of each dimension is described below:

i.   Ease of use
Ease of use is defined as the ease of conducting external search in cyberspace and search within the Web site. External search refers to the extent to which customers can easily find the Web site on the worldwide Web. The use of set up links with major search engines and concise URL addresses are options that help to attain this objective.

Customers demand for easy to find Web sites, easy to use and navigate. However, users always complained on the difficulties with internal navigation and use. This is the main problem to this dimension. Furthermore, there are Web sites which offer the option of internal search, which allow customers to search within the site by product, feature, or keyword. Hence, ease of use is recognized as an important determinant in the dimension of e-service quality.

ii.   Appearance
Appearance is defined as the proper use of color, graphics, images, and animations, together with the appropriate size of the Web pages. Appearance is usually the first determinant observed by Web users. They commented positively on pleasant eye catching colors, complementary

colors, simple appealing colors, and colors that were coordinated with the logo or brand image of the product. Conversely, they were annoyed by too many or too few colors, poorly matched colors, dark and boring colors as well.

The positive elements in a quality Web site can be achieved when good quality graphics, pictures, images, animation, java applets, moving objects, and zooming functions applied in the Web sites. In addition, the size of a Web page is an important factor in appearance. The Web pages that can fit into one screen, and have plenty of white space can facilitate reading and ease of navigation. However, oversized pages and graphics, or having to scroll around to view the whole page, were not appealing to Web users.

iii.   Linkage

Linkage refers to the number and quality of links that a Web site offers. The links have to be set up and maintained properly to avoid unexpected error message from appearing. Poor quality of linked sites damages the total e-service quality of the home site.

iv.   Structure and layout

Structure and layout refers to the organization and presentation of a Web site's content and information. Simple, clear, and consistent layout, good use of frame, site map which allows users to skip sections that they have no interest in, a clear listed menu, and the company logo being presented on each page were recommended as e-service quality factors. In contrast, too much small print, and complicated layout may be the reasons for users to leave the Web site.

v.   Content

Content refers to the presentation and layout of factual information and functions on a Web site. The web sites which provide detailed information, using simple words and phrases to express meanings and easy to understand are much better than complicated ones. Companies should take advantage of this dimension because it will let users know in depth the overall business activities by going through the content provided in the Web sites. For instance, the features that can be included into this dimension are online brochure, audio player, video preview, and 3D product viewing.

vi.   Reliability

Reliability refers to the ability to perform the promised service accurately and consistently, including frequency of updating the Web site, promptly reply to customer enquiries, and accuracy of online purchasing and billing. Parasuraman et al. (1988) stated that reliability is the most important dimension in all services. The Web sites that at all times update their information received high appraisals rather than those who do not update frequently. The features that related to this dimension are for example, ecommerce features such as online purchasing, billing and others.

vii.   Efficiency

In this research, efficiency refers to the speed of downloading, search and navigation. The service is perceived as efficient when there are fast download, fast loading of pages and images, and speedy search mechanisms. However, the complicated graphics can slower the speed of

navigation. Therefore, companies should be aware on the graphics that used to support those applications.

viii.   Support

Support is composed by the technical help, user guidelines, and personal advice available to customers from a Web site. The features included in this dimension are frequently asked questions (FAQs), feedback and complaint through email, and others. Currently, companies are practicing support by email or telephone calls where users can directly report and request for assistance from the companies.

ix.   Communication

Communication can be defined as keeping customers properly informed and communicating with them in a language they can understand. Communication is important to both users and companies. They are dealing through communication medium whether online communication like emails or traditional channel such as telephone, fax, and postal mail. Basically, a good quality Web site must offer many contact methods. In this technology era, companies should not have to rely on only one medium of communication. This is due to each communication is complement to each other, hence providing the companies with a better quality of services.

x.   Security

Security refers to freedom from danger, risk or doubt during the service process. Mostly, Web users are aware of the security aspects that implemented in the Web site that they dealing with. High security level being implemented can enhance the build trust among Web users to make online transaction. Due to problems such as credit card stealing, fraud, identity theft, and many more, Web users are aware of their details. Web users want their details are safe during transactions, even after the transactions.

xi.   Incentive

Incentive is the encouragement given by Web providers to consumers to browse and use the Web site, including rewards for doing so. These days, transaction through internet is highly competitive environment. Thus, the offer of incentives encourages Web users to test the Web site and engage in online purchasing. It will be able to increase customer retention and word of mouth as well. It is recommended that this dimension have to be in the Web site because it can attract and retain online customers.

The comparison of the technical features of products is essentially costless, feasible, and easier than comparisons of products through traditional channels making service quality as key determinant for successful ecommerce (Santos, 2003). There are incubative and active dimensions of e-service quality which have been proposed for increasing hit rates, stickiness, and customer retention. The incubative dimension consists of ease of use, appearance, linkage, structure and layout, and content. Meanwhile, the active dimension consists of reliability, efficiency, support, communication, security, and incentives.

RESEARCH FRAMEWORK

For the purpose of this research, a model of e-service quality by Santos (2003) and e-CRM features proposed by Feinberg and Kadam (2002) were adopted. Santos (2003) purported 11 dimensions of e-service quality while Feinberg and Kadam (2002) listed in detail 44 e-CRM features on the Websites that each company should consider adopting in order to enhance customer relationships.

Survey Design

The questionnaire instrument contained two parts: Part A consisted of Demographic items and Part B consisted of E-CRM features. A background details of the respondent such as age, gender, job description, telecommunication services being subscribed, and their experience in browsing telecommunication's websites are among the questions being asked. This part requires the respondent to tick which option applies to him or her. Part B seeks to examine the features that respondents perceived as important in delivering quality services online.

Data Collection

The targeted respondent of this survey are Malaysian who use mobile or telecommunication services. This would cover different age groups coming from different states in Malaysia and work in different sectors of the employment. Data were collected through questionnaire survey and were distributed to 500 respondents who were randomly selected.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS

Out of 500 survey questionnaire being distributed, 391 or 78.2% were returned. However, only 93% or 344 of the returned questionnaire were able to be analyzed since the remaining had missing answers. The results of the survey on consumers' preferences are discussed below.

Demographic Profiles

Demographic profiles analyzed the background of the respondents including their gender, age, profession, type of telco's subscription, and their experience of browsing telco's Websites, Out of 344 respondents, 44% are male and 56% are female. Majority of the respondents are within the age range of 18 to 25 years (59%). Out of 344 respondents, 213 of them are students (62%), 46 are professionals (13%), 21 are technicians (6%), 29 are managers (8%), 13 are operators (4%), and remaining are from other sectors.

We have found that 209 respondents subscribe to Maxis, 181 to Celcom, and 55 to Digi. Many of the respondents have experience subscribing to more than one telco service companies. There are 88 (26%) of them have two subscriptions and 7 (2%) of them have subscribed to all three telco service companies before.

Majority of the respondents have experience browsing the telecommunication Websites. About 86% of the respondents have visited telecommunication Website before. Among the services that they have been using are downloading ringtones, caller tones, games, themes, getting general information, paying for bills, and reporting. Table1 summarizes the profile of the respondents.

Table 1. Demographic Profile of the Survey Respondents

Items		Frequency	Percentage
Gender	Male	150	43.6
	Female	194	56.4
	Total	344	100.0
Age	Below 18	31	9.0
	18 – 25	204	59.3
	26 – 29	47	13.7
	30 – 40	36	10.5
	41 and above	25	7.3
	Missing	1	0.3
	Total	344	100.0
Profession	Student	213	62.0
	Professional	46	13.4
	Technical	21	6.1
	Management	29	8.4
	Operator	13	3.8
	Others	20	5.8
	Missing	2	0.6
	Total	344	100.0
Telecommunication Subscription	Celcom	97	28.2
	Digi	33	9.6
	Maxis	118	34.3
	Both Celcom & Digi	4	1.2
	Both Celcom & Maxis	73	21.2
	Both Digi & Maxis	11	3.2
	All Celcom, Digi, & Maxis	7	2.0
	Missing	1	0.3
	Total	344	100.0
Browsing Telco Website Experience	Yes	299	86.9
	No	43	12.5
	Missing	2	0.06
	Total	344	100.0

Cronbach's Alpha Test of Reliability of the test instrument

Cronbach's Alpha Test was conducted to determine the reliability of each eleven determinants of the service quality being evaluated. The eleven determinants are *Ease of Use, Reliability, Linkage, Structure and Layout, Incentive, Information, Efficiency, Communication, Security, Support,* and *Appearance*. Out of the study performed, the instrument is found to be reliable and consistent.

Correlation Coefficients of the eleven determinants of e-service quality

Next analysis performed to identify the relationship between each of the determinant factor with the total e-service quality. Correlation coefficient test is performed on the 11 determinants and the result is summarized in table 3.

It is found that, all of the 11 determinants have positive relationship with the e-service quality with the range of r-value 0.43 to 0.87. However the weakest relationship is *appearance* determinant. Even so, the r value of 0.43 is still considered that the *appearance* determinant significantly has positive relationship with the service quality since the number of points being evaluated, *n,* is considerably high at 344.

Table 2 Determinants' Relationship with Service Quality

Determinants	Value	P-Value
Information	0.869**	0.000
Ease of use	0.811**	0.000
Support	0.805**	0.000
Communication	0.800**	0.000
Security	0.765**	0.000
Structure and layout	0.741**	0.000
Efficiency	0.718**	0.000
Incentives	0.710**	0.000
Linkage	0.706**	0.000
Reliability	0.611**	0.000
Appearance	0.426**	0.000

Note ** Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level

Analysis of e-CRM Features

Of the 44 elements being evaluated, the customers' preferences of the features are being ranked. This is relevant to the objectives of this research in proposing the model of customers' perceived importance of e-CRM features.

Table 3 Ranked features of e-CRM based on customers' preferences

No	Code	Feature	Means
1	A3	Quick order ability	81.22
2	K42	Appearance-color	79.59
3	F20	Customer service page	79.48
4	K44	Apperance-professional	79.48
5	A2	Ease of Check Out	79.36
6	I35	Posted pribacy policy	78.14
7	I36	Membership	77.91
8	F19	Product info online	77.62
9	I37	Account condition	77.33
10	A5	Order	76.57
11	K43	Appearance-animation	76.57
12	A6	Local search engine	76.51
13	J40	Complaining ability	76.51
14	A4	Preview product	76.45
15	F24	Store locater	76.45
16	G26	Intro for first time user	76.28
17	B10	Ability to track order status	75.93

Table 3 Ranked features of e-CRM based on customers' preferences (continued)

No	Code	Feature	Means
18	J38	FAQs	75.81
19	F18	account information	75.70
20	E17	members benefits	75.47
21	F25	On-sales area	75.35
22	B8	Email	75.29
23	A7	Online purchasing	75.00
24	A1	Mailing List	74.83
25	J39	Problem solving	74.59
26	F21	Product highlight	74.53
27	H28	Toll-free number	74.42
28	H34	E-Bulletin board	74.13
29	D14	Site map	73.90
30	H33	Bulletin board	73.66
31	H29	Posted Address	72.67
32	D13	Site tour	72.38
33	F23	Company history	72.03
34	C11	links	71.74
35	J41	Spare parts	71.57
36	F22	Request for catalog	71.22
37	C12	affinity program	71.10
38	H32	Chat	70.17
39	H30	Call-back button	69.77
40	H27	Fax	68.20
41	H31	Voice Over IP	67.27
42	B9	Customization possibility	66.86
43	E16	Gift certificate purchase	66.86
44	D15	Site customization	62.73

Based on the table above, it is found that *quick order ability*, *color appearance of the Websites*, *customers service page*, *professional look of the Website*, *ease of check out*, *posted privacy policy*, *product information online*, *account condition*, and *order* features are among the features being ranked as most important. However, features such as *site customization*, *gift certificate purchase, product customization possibility, VoIP, fax, call-back button, chat, affinity program, request for catalog* and *spare parts (accessories) availability* are deemed less important features.

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

Based on the relationship of all eleven determinants which are information, ease of use, support, communication, security, structure and layout, efficiency, incentives, linkage, reliability, and appearance, it was found that all of the determinants have positive relationship with the e-Service Quality. Meanwhile, ranking that have been performed to see which e-CRM features being perceived the most important by customers revealed that quick order ability, color of the website, and customer service page is the most appreciated ones and features such as site customization, gift certificate purchase, and product customization possibility are the least preferred. During the average means performed, the determinants of e-Service Quality being ranked and found that determinant appearance is ranked as the first determinant perceived important, whereas linkage is perceived as less important.

In order to be competitive, firms should strive for adding value in their offerings. Providing facilities such as tracking orders, keeping and tracking records of consumers' history of purchases or activities, allowing some degree of customization, and understanding consumers' specific needs and preferences enhance consumers' perceived value thus increases loyalty. To satisfy online consumers, firms must focus on these criteria of services. Firstly, customer service quality should be given a top priority since it is the first contact point for consumers to evaluate whether or not a firm is reliable. When one finds difficulty in communicating with the customer service, that is either an enquiry is not attended to within a reasonable time or representative appears to have insufficient knowledge, he/she would immediately make an adverse evaluation about a firm's service performance. In a highly competitive environment such as the Internet, this unpleasant experience (leading to dissatisfaction) would leave firms losing not only one potential consumer but perhaps many more, due to "word-of-mouth". Hence, firms are well advised to attend to consumer complaints efficiently, clearly display the links to customer service and help desk, and to have a customer service representative always available.

Next, the quality of information should be another important attribute firms should be concerned about. Since Internet technology stems from computer technology, which is believed to process and deliver information at speed, the relevancy and accuracy of information seem to be compulsory criteria of a Web site. A site that displays information that has expired at a point of time may be viewed as inefficient. In addition, it is vital for a firm to accurately capture and deliver orders within the promised time. Failing this will result in not only consumers' frustration but will adversely affect consumers' assessment of firms' performance. Then, ease of site navigation is also vital. Generally, Internet consumers are impatient hence loading speed of the site, simplicity of use and accessibility are critical.

In this study, respondents were asked to assess Web sites of companies from the telecommunication sector. More in depth studies could be carried out to investigate the use of E-CRM in industry specific environment such as financial sector, entertainment, health, government, and education sector since E-CRM may imply different meanings from one industry to another. This study is concerned with customers' perceived importance of e-service quality entailing to enhanced customer relationships. Although companies are well advised to adopt an E-CRM strategy its implementation may vary depending on the business scale. For example, small businesses may not be able to fully utilize the potential of Internet technology due to constraints in resources. Hence, E-CRM implementation in various business scenario merits further investigation.

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