

## **CUSTOMER RELATIONSHIP MANAGEMENT – A CASE STUDY IN URBAN WATER UTILITIES IN VIETNAM**

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**Abstract:** *Customer is the rationale for the existence of any company because a company sells products or services in a relationship with customers. According to Michael LeBoeuf, every company's greatest assets are its customers, because without customers there is no company. There is no doubt that the better a company can manage its customer relationships, the more success it is likely to have. To facilitate a successful Customer Relationship Management (CRM), there are many CRM tools such as variety of software provide by different companies. The businesses can choose the most feasible and suitable with their actual situation and capacity. This paper addresses the concept of CRM – what it is, why it is so important, what current trends it has. Not only analyzing CRM from a general perspective, we take water utilities in Vietnam as a case study to feature CRM in a more lively and practical way.*

**Keywords:** *Customer Relation Management, Water, Water Supply Service, Customer Satisfaction, Equitization (privatization)*

### **1. WHAT IS CUSTOMER RELATIONSHIP MANAGEMENT?**

Customer Relationship Management (CRM) is a process that business uses to interact and manage all the relationship with customer and potential customers. Currently, CRM are usually known as a technical system that a company uses for indexing their customer (CRM software or CRM web-services). CRM is normally used for managing a large amount of customer for big or even personal business (Ex: Realtor, Credit Sales, Insurance Sales...). This not only improves profitability but also save a lot of time for sales departments and so on.

Customer Relationship Management simply allows you to control, categorize, and summarize all the customer details using your filter and criteria. CRM is not just for Sales Department anymore, this could also be used to manage employees, suppliers or simply ... anything that you have data about. This is the must-have tools to compete in this era where technology, product can be outdated in as short as only a few weeks.

Compare to ERP - Enterprise Resources Planning, CRM is another the side of the coin which is mainly focus on outside of the company and relationship between the business with these outsiders while ERP's target is mostly inside of the company - the resources that the business can control.

## **2. WHY MANAGING CUSTOMER RELATIONSHIP?**

The number of customers that an enterprise has to handle is increasing. According to Jillian Hufford in the article “Amazon statistics: Need to know number about Amazon” published on January 2018, the number of active accounts in Amazon system was estimated at 310 million in 2016. In order to manage all customer data, Customer Relationship Manager (CRM) is a must-have tool.

CRM, with its abilities to store a huge amount of customer information, provides a better way for a company to manage its relationship between the company and its consumers. There are two undeniable benefits of CRM that are listed below.

Firstly, CRM allows a manager to monitor his/her interactions with the company’s customers. Because of that, the firm will need only a small number of employees to manage all of its customers. That is the reason why a big enterprise does not need too many employees. With a cut of human resources, company may save a lot of money but is still able to operate normally. This not only helps reducing the cost but also increase the company’s profit. A side effect of that is productivity enhancing which also improves the company performance.

Secondly, CRM could save many profile details of a customer in a comprehensive way. The data helps manager to be able to analyse the habit, hobby or the need of each customer. Based on these analysed information, the company will be able to improve its products or services in order to satisfy the needs of customer in a better way. That is how CRM helps a company to gain the trust from customers and also makes them become loyal consumers, both are beneficial for a company’s business.

In summary, Customer Relationship is needed to bring more benefits to the company. But the most important reason that makes you use CRM is because the big enterprises are using it. In order to keep your company in the race with them, the easiest way is follow their lead by using CRM.

## **3. CUSTOMER RELATIONSHIP MANAGEMENT TRENDS 2018**

For the last few years, Artificial Intelligence (AI) becoming the trend of almost every technology systems and CRM is also one of these.

### **3.1 Embedded Artificial Intelligence (AI)**

Nowadays, the amount of information that a manager has to manage is skyrocketing. For example, in the case of grab taxi, the number of daily rides was around 4 million in 2018 (Craig Smith, 2018, Grab Statistic Section). That means Grab managers have to sort out the information of at least 4 million trips per day which is a huge amount of data. That is when AI kick in and SaleForce is one of the leaders in this trend. Sale Force introduced their AI tool in late 2016 and still improving their system till now. They have acquired 4 startups that AI related which are Tempo, MinHash, PredictionIO and MetaMind. Combine all these technology, SaleForce create Einstein – their AI tools embedded inside their CRM system which is going to provide many benefits such as account insights, recognize potential customer, automatic exact social network conversations and more.

In March, IBM and Sales force announced their Land market Global Strategic Partnership (SalesForce, Mar 7 - 2017) which is simply an evidence for SalesForce effort to become the leader in the AI CRM market.

The others competitors of SalsForce are not too far behind. Oracle, one of top 10 CRM developer in the world, announced the existence of their AI tools project which called “Intelligent Cloud Applications” (Oracle Press Release, Sep 19 - 2016) at nearly the same time as SalesForce Einstein introduction. They also give user a glimpse of what can this AI help them (Oracle Press Release, Apr 26 - 2017).

SAP, the German giant also set up a plan to build a machine learning AI to embed into their CRM cloud service. This project called SAP Leonardo (Product list in SAP.com, 2017)

The main reason why almost all CRM developer have to embed AI into their products, services is to save time of the customer, to reduce the amount of manager a company need for analyzing the database which is becoming bigger and bigger every day. And that will be the trend not just for this year but has been predicted to be the trend of the next year also.

#### **4. LIMITED THIRD-PARTY INTEGRATION**

Thanks to Facebook-Cambridge Analytica data scandal, the policy about third Party Integration in the whole Europe has been changed (Alex Hern – 17 April 2018). From Facebook to Algolia or Github, the private data policies changed to make it much harder for Third Party to exact the data from it. CRM also will have to follow this trend. SalesForce already send email to its customers since the beginning of Facebook scandal.

In the long-term, limited Third Party Integration will discourage the community to support the products or services by making their own plugin or selling information between companies which mean more private for customers but harder for managers to control their customers information. Some of SalesForce Social feed already stopped working due to this change of policy and it’s really a big problem to them.

For summary, there are two undeniable trends of CRM: AI and Reduced Third Party Integration. AI could be the next year trend too. However, the privacy of customer information placed at the highest priority due to the Facebook-Cambridge Analytica data scandal.

#### **5. WATER AND WATER BUSINESS**

Water is life because it is vital for the all living organisms on Earth. As a human being, we cannot survive without water for 5 days. Starting from the fact that nearly 900 million people worldwide do not have access to clean and safe water, the United Nations Assembly declared that “the right to safe and clean drinking water and sanitation is a human right that is essential to the full enjoyment of life and all human rights” (United Nations General Assembly, 2010). Not only being essential for life, water also carries in itself an important spiritual meaning of family connections and social interactions, (e.g. giving bath to our children, swimming with family members and friends), religions, sacred ceremonies and cultural events around the

world. Water is thus essential on three levels, to sustain life, enable economic growth and to mediate the social world (Peter Prevos, 2017).

There has been some argument about what type of goods and product water should be classified. In practice, water is often considered as a public goods and service. However, the Dublin Statement on Water and Sustainable Development recognized it as an economic goods. The status of human right does not preclude water from being a commercial good because food, clothing and housing are formal human rights and at the same time highly commercialized commodities (Peter Prevos, 2017). In addition, water industry is a natural monopoly due to the required large investment in the water transmission and distribution network and economies of scale should be taken into account or in some cases, due to the limited availability of water resources.

### **5.1 Water companies in Vietnam**

In Vietnam, clean water is considered as a public goods and water supply is a conditioned business controlled by the Government in order to protect people's health and social welfare. According to the Vietnam Water Supply and Sewerage Association, there are 111 companies operating in urban water supply throughout the country. These companies are located in 63 provinces and cities under central administration. The total designed capacity of the water treatment plants is 8.5 million m<sup>3</sup>/day, satisfying 84.5% of urban population's needs (33 million urban inhabitants out of 95 million total population) (VWSA, 2015). To provide water to the local users, the water companies and the local authorities enter in an agreement with that sets forth the basic elements such as scope and area of service, water supply plan, financial resources, water tariffs and tariffs adjustment roadmap, service conditions as well as rights and obligations of each party.

In addition, the water supply company signs a service contract as a legal document with the water consumers. This contract sets forth the subjects of the contract, purposes of water consumption, service quality and standards, rights and obligations of each party, water tariffs and method of payment, settlement of violations and other contents agreed by the two parties.

Working on clean water business, the companies not only enjoy the natural monopoly but also have a number of other advantages. Firstly, water is an essential goods that all the urban citizens cannot live without. The demand never reduces, on the contrary, with high urbanization rate of 37.5% in 2017 (Ministry of Construction, 2018) and increased year by year, the demand constantly increases. Therefore, the company never has to worry about not having customers. Secondly, clean water is also a product that can be produced for immediate use by the households, industries and commercial entities. Thirdly, the costs of inputs materials, operation and maintenance, labor are not high. The largest investment lies in the construction of water treatment plants, transmission and distribution pipe network but these works are fixed assets, need only one-time investment and are depreciated annually. Fourthly, the water price is quite stable, only keeps increasing but not reducing. This helps the companies to have stable revenue.

With all the above-mentioned advantages, it does not mean that running a water company is an easy and simple task and that they can do whatever they like. Water, with its critical importance and strong & direct impact in people's life, social welfare, public health, production

(e.g. food and energy) and economic development, can pose a lot of pressures on the company. The local authorities assume the responsibility of ensuring access to clean water – in a safe and efficient manner for its citizens. This has political implications. In order to gain the trust from their citizens and get their votes for elections, the leadership of the local government has to make sure that the people are happy with the quality and standards of water service. When there is any problem about water for example, there is water shortage, water crisis, the water company will find complaints about their service and their name will immediately appear on the newspapers and television as the press and media also have great interest in this field. A disadvantage for a water company is that the water price is, in most of the cases, regulated regardless of the market conditions; therefore, it does not increase regularly even if the costs for water production increase. The interval between water tariff increases is quite long and the leadership of the local authority are not so willing to raise the water price to affect basically all the city's inhabitants.

The company has to make every effort, provide all the evidence and explanations and go through long process to get a price adjustment. Once again, the company will find itself in the mass media and their operations will be analysed from every angle. This fact does mean that, in order to have smooth operation, the company has to maintain a very good relationship with the local authority and the press. Another fact is that the progressive water tariffs is used as a tool to encourage people to save water. As a result, even if a company wants the people to use more to pay higher and to make full use of the company's capacity, it is only their wish and beyond their ability to make it come true.

Satisfied water consumers are not only meaningful for the politicians for improving their status and prestige in the public. Satisfied customers are also beneficial for the water companies. They will be more willing to pay for the water bills in time, helping to improve financial performance for the company. In most of the time, they are also more willing to accept water price increase. Less complaints from customers means less problems and work for the company to deal with so they can focus on improving their operational performance.

## **5.2 CRM in water companies in Vietnam**

Despite providing a special goods and product, CRM in water utilities does not find itself as an exception in the new digital trends, in particular, the rise of mobility to allow getting required information in the right time and the customer-centric collaboration and self-service capabilities for consumers. In principle, all of the urban population in Vietnam are customers of 111 water companies and the customer base just keep developing very fast in parallel with the rate of 45% from now to 2020 (Ministry of Construction of Vietnam, 2018). Each water utility basically has to deal with all the existing and future urban population, for example, at present, Sai Gon Water Corporation provides water to 7 million people in Ho Chi Minh City and Ha Noi Limited Water Company serves more than 3 million people in the capital city of Hanoi (VWSA, 2015).

For water companies, mobility can imply a faster, more efficient way for water companies to collect data and make better decisions more quickly. With the help of mobile devices, especially smart phones, people are now enabled to communicate on any device at any place

and any time. By making devices and applications available for the employees and customers, customers and the employees can provide and respond to service request in a more streamlined manner. The companies can also invest in mobile applications to enable the customer to have instant contact with the company as well as enable itself to settle the requests, orders and complaints of the customers faster.

One can argue that with natural monopoly, a water company does not need to pay much attention to customers because the customers anyway do not have any other choice and alternative for service provided by other company. The customers will always be there regardless of whether they are cared by the company. However, as mentioned above, customers as citizens of a city have bigger voices that are heard by the politicians of the local authority whose decision directly affects the business of the water company. Moreover, it will be hard for the Company to get water price increase when encountering big protest from the unsatisfied customer.

In addition to the reasons why CRM is needed as analysed in the previous part, there are six more causes explaining why Vietnamese water companies should apply Customer Relationship Management in the context of availability of CRM tools. Firstly, water as the product of their business, is a sensitive goods which concerns everybody. Secondly, they have a huge customer base which keeps increasing constantly to manage. Thirdly, the expectations of the customers are increasing, especially the sophisticated ones. Fourthly, the local authorities, in order to please their citizens, poses higher requirements on service quantity and quality to the companies. Fifthly, the company needs to gain the public support and acceptance during the approval of water price increase; Sixthly, the company has the pressure of improving performance, especially in the context of transformation from state companies into joint stock ones under the equitization policy in Vietnam.

While the first five points are quite obvious and self-explanatory, the last point on equitization process needs further analysis. Equitization (privatization) of water supply companies in Vietnam is a significant policy of the Government as part of the reforms and restructuring state-owned enterprises aiming at mobilization and utilization of the resources of the society in a most efficient manner, creating new momentum for improved production and business, improving competitiveness and sustainable development in the market economy. Implementing this policy, the water supply companies in Vietnam started equitization since 2005 and at present, 90% of them have been equitized. The equitization of water companies have important implications in raising their attention to customers. As a part of the process of transforming the water companies into more independent, financially autonomous and sustainable entities, stronger links between the Company and its customers should be created. This is of particular importance in a business environment that is changing from a centrally administered structure, as it has been the case in Vietnam, to a more market orientated and competitive service one, which involves the community and customers for whom the service is provided.

By good customer relationship management and more precisely, managing the stakeholders as water involves everyone, the water companies can create value for all of them on the basis



of trust and active cooperation. That requires the company to understand, anticipate, manage and personalize the needs of their current and potential future customers. In fact, the quality of customer service and the type and intensity of customer relations are key indicators of successful management in all companies. The development of a positive relationship between the water company, the general public, and its customers is critically important. The public has given local authorities the responsibility, amongst others, for providing safe and clean water to them.

Even in case the customers are not so aware of the existence of a water company because all they care is that water coming out when they open the tap (all students of eMBA 16 of the National Economics University did not know the name of the company that provides water to them), they know it each time they receive the monthly water bill. Good management of customer relationship, for water companies, does not mean that they understand their customers' needs and expectations, but also have to make the customers understand, among others, their nature of business, the costly infrastructure they operate, how water is produced and how precious it is, what happens during a water crisis (water shortage and cut) and how the company deals with this... This is even more important if the local government introduces water saving programme, for example, in summer to ensure all the urban population have access to water and requires the participation of all water company's customers. So, customer relationship management in water companies is a two-way interaction with customers instead of having customers passively consuming water service. In fact, active support and participation of the customers can make contribution to the improvement of services provided by the Company.

It is said that a successful CRM implementation will allow the management and staff to have a more holistic view of the Company's customers, their needs and their expectations. This will enable management to make quick, informed decisions, in relation to day to day activities and to deliver personalized customer care. Successful CRM usually forms part of the Company's Business Plan or Development Plan which drives the needed changes for improved service delivery and customer satisfaction.

A vital element is the creation of a truly customer centered philosophy that is understood by each and every person employed in the Company. CRM is a system that is driven by both clear targets and the staff in charge of CRM. That's why the real meaning of CRM lies in mobilizing the potential of people to bring about a better experience for the customers of the company.

A successful CRM system in a water company focuses on the following aspects. Firstly, it is customer centric policy with clear regulations for all staff of the company to follow. Secondly, the customer care unit serves as the central point within the Company to develop and implement the strategies dealing with customer relations, community engagement and customer complaints management. Thirdly, it is important to have a customer complaints management that can handle complaints in the best way to improve the public's perception of the Company's professionalism and integrity. Fourthly, the company needs to conduct public relation activities to make it visible, inform the customers and the public about the company,

and effectively deal with the media to avoiding critical and negative impacts. Fifthly, awareness raising campaigns is useful to disseminate information and/or raise public awareness about water, including education for children; Lastly, the company needs to have customer satisfaction monitoring system to identify the level of satisfaction of the customers through surveys, direct dialogues or interviews (Roderic Chisholm and Le Thi My Linh, 2007).

### 5.3 Current status of CRM of water companies in Vietnam and application of MIS in CRM

All operators of urban water supply in Vietnam have had their own customer relationship management system in this form or another. Some systems are modern and automatic and at the same time connected to other operational system of the company such as network monitoring, asset management. Others are simple and manually managed, therefore need upgrading. The following table presents some key information about CRM in water utilities in Vietnam. The interesting fact is that after equitization, most of the companies set up the CCU and improved CRM system.

Table-1: Current Status of CRM

Indicator	Status
Dedicated Customer Service Department	Most of the time, it is a division under a department, e.g. department of cooperation and development. Sometimes it is a separate and independent department
CRM tools/software	Diversified ranging from simple and manual to modern and automatic such as professional grade telephony & CRM database system
Customer Care Unit	Yes Many companies have 24/7 Contact Center, Information Units for different groups of customers, Counter Service...
Public relations and awareness campaigns	Regularly conducted by the Company
Water billing	- Manually – the Company’s staff come to individual household to collect (Hanoi Water Limited Company): good for customers but not efficient for the Company; - Collection/payment points in the city - Bank transfers (most of companies) - Electronic billing and online payment (some companies)
Channels to receive/resolve queries and complaints from customers	hotline and telephones toll free line Fax/email/SMS/Twitter/Facebook



As a first step, most of the water companies have organized or sent their employees for training on CRM to develop and sustain the relations with customers, improve the employees' service communication skills, prepare and implement customer development plan. Some companies, with the support of development partners such as the World Bank, German International Development (GIZ), can hire experienced consulting firm on CRM to provide training as well as set up a modern CRM system and develop guidelines for CRM in their companies.

The status and level of the CRM in the companies depends not only on their financial and technical capacity but also on their strategy towards customers. In many cases, customer management strategy, the goodwill and willingness to make investment in the systems of the company is more important. To provide an evidence for this fact, Son La Water Supply Joint Stock Company which is located in a poor mountainous area of Vietnam is taken as an example.

Son La Water Supply Company (SLWSC) is among small- sized group of water companies in Vietnam and is located in a mountainous area with a lot of economic disadvantages. With the current capacity of 40,000 m<sup>3</sup>/day, it provides water for 187,000 people in the city and some districts of the province (VWSA, 2015).

After equitization, SLWSC has made every effort to reform its governance, apply modern technology and scientific advances in their production and business to improve the service quality to the consumers. Making customer centric strategy as a priority, the Company has invested in installation and application of Citywork software to manage the water distribution network and the customer relationship. Optimization of customer relationship management based on technology has helped the company to reduce 12% of water loss – equivalent to 400,000 m<sup>3</sup>/year and improve water quality for the customers (Kim Anh, 2017).

To further improve the water service quality and customer care service, in January, 2017, the Company launched the call center (customer care) numbered 1900636761 to help receive and respond to customer's feedback and comments more effectively and professionally. This call center is integrated to the Citywork software. The call center allows the Company's employees to receive the calls from the customers whose information and data are automatically displayed including their location, water consumption, water bill, history of their requests and complaints... This is an excellent means of interactions between the company and the customers, making the company closer to the customer - "a click away from its customers".

Moreover, SLWSC introduced "Clean Water Apps" which not only allows the users to monitor their water consumptions on monthly or yearly basis, check on the status of their monthly water bill but also enable them to report to the company any incident/problem they discover in their neighborhood. For example, they can inform the water company about the pipe break in there are just by two times click on their mobile or computer and the message is sent immediately to the responsible department of the Company. With this valuable information, SLWSC can send its staff to fix the pipe break to reduce water loss for the company to avoid wastage and at the same time save clean water for other households in need.

On the website of SLWSC, the customers can find useful information about how water is produced, the hints for water saving for in-house water using, how to minimize water leakage from the water meters, information about water tariffs, water application template, template water service contract between the company and individual customers, water bills, methods of payment... The online application is made possible, the online survey is available for all customers. In addition, SLWSC also has its Facebook which is updated regularly and present a strong tool in interacting with the customers.

The introduction of modern CRM system in SLWSC is an important step in increasing customer satisfaction through timely receiving and solving customer's complaints, advising customers on their problems and enable direct and fast interactions between them. Moreover, it is very beneficial for SLWSC itself. Firstly, the leadership of the Company can monitor the history of the whole communication chain between the customers and the employees, understand the issues of the customers and the performance of its staff. They also master the status of the water distribution network. Once a failures and problems arise, the company can give timely solutions.

Improving customer satisfaction is one factor contributing to the fact that the customers are willing to pay for the average water price at VND 8,700/m<sup>3</sup> (nearly 40 USD cent) – which is even higher than in big cities like Hanoi (VND 6,800/m<sup>3</sup> and Ho Chi Minh City (VND 7,000/m<sup>3</sup>) where the affordability of the people is much higher. At the same time, the local authority of Son La was happy with the performance of the company and approved the water price increase proposal of the Company more easily.

It seems that there is a connection between equitization process and a professional CRM system established for a water company. While SLWSC has completed equitization, both of the largest water companies in Vietnam i.e. Ha Noi Limited Water Company and Sai Gon Water Corporation have not finished this process. At the same time, the two companies are only in the process of setting a professional CRM system.

With such a well-established CRM system, what can be recommended for the SLWSC for further improvement is to introduce online payment of monthly water bill to supplement to the current methods of payment of money transfer and on-site payment at several collection points in the city. Many other water supply companies have applied this method of payment to increase convenience for the customers.

## **6. CONCLUSION**

Customer is the reason why a company exists. Therefore, customer relationship management plays a vital role and should be considered as the center of operations of a company as well as in its strategic and business development plan. The development of CRM goes hand in hand with the national development policies and does not go beyond the transformation of any industry or strategy of a company. The CRM industry has grown very fast in recent years – both in quality and quantity. This has made available a variety of products for the companies to use. Therefore, businesses have conditions not to stop increasing investments in CRM solutions to go ahead. From the study and analysis, CRM is applicable

for any type of businesses, even with those that has natural monopoly and provide public goods and products such as water supply companies. Study on CRM in water business in Vietnam shows that investment in CRM not only depends on the technical and financial capacity of a company. Rather, it depends on the strategy of the company towards their customers. It also has a strong connection to the national policy such as equitization (privatization) to make the companies more autonomous. Investment in CRM do mean investment for the future of the companies as it really brings them important and long-term benefits in terms of their standing, performance, visibility, public trust, and profitability.

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