

**A critical appraisal of the customer service and service quality in  
appliance sales departments in prominent South African retail  
stores**

**by**

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**Thesis submitted in fulfilment of the requirements for the degree  
PhD Consumer Science (Interior merchandise management)**

**in the**

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## *Declaration*

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I declare that the thesis that I hereby submit for the degree PhD Consumer Science (Interior Merchandise Management) at the University of Pretoria, is my own work and has not previously been submitted by me for a degree at this or any other tertiary institution.

Alida J Gothan

## *Synopsis*

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A critical appraisal of the customer service and service quality in appliance sales departments in prominent South African retail stores

by

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Degree: PhD Consumer Science (Interior merchandise management)

This research investigated the service offering in appliance sales departments of prominent retail stores in an emerging economy to ultimately indicate whether stores' customer service, i.e. their presentation of the marketing mix is conducive for informed, responsible buying decisions. The study was prompted by significant changes in the profile of South African consumers since 1994 when a new socio-political dispensation was introduced. A sharp increase in the middle-income group since has resulted in an increased demand for housing, electricity and consequently also major household appliances. Retail responded more than willingly. Unfortunately the consequences of limited product related consumer socialization for millions of previously disadvantaged consumers and subsequent lack of structural and transactional knowledge in terms of their ability to cope in the market place was given little attention.

The research involved four phases of data collection and the participation of five prominent department stores in Tshwane, RSA that was arranged through liaison with industry. Phase 1 involved an in store survey: store managers assessed the customer service in the stores in the presence of the researcher, according to indicators that

were based on the marketing mix. In phase 2, respondents (n=296) were recruited in the stores immediately after closure of a sales deal: questionnaires were completed on the spot. It involved (1) an investigation of their satisfaction with the customer service; (2) an investigation of their perception of the service quality through a SERVQUAL scale and (3) a product knowledge test that pertained to the functional and performance attributes of the appliances that they purchased. During phase 3, experienced salespeople (n=18) were involved in a projective technique that expected of them to act as the managers of their respective stores and to propose recommendations to augment their stores' service offering to be more conducive for informed, responsible buying decisions. Finally, in phase 4, representatives from industry explained their potential contribution to augment customer service in retail stores.

Findings revealed shortcomings in the customer service in retail that should be addressed to enhance informed, responsible buying decisions. In phase 1, store managers candidly admitted that in general, price was attended to more attentively than elements such as processes that could enhance informed buying decisions. In the customer survey, exploratory factor analysis revealed a collapse of the original customer service scale from six elements to three, which suggests a more integrated judgement of customer service in the context of this research. Emphasis on price and product was diminished and directed towards value for money and personnel orientations. Similarly the five dimensional SERVQUAL scale was reduced to two dimensions (Supportiveness and Impressiveness). The product knowledge test was used to indicate whether consumers' judgement of the service offering was supported by evidence of informed, buying decisions. Consumers' scores contradicted their apparent satisfaction with customer service and their positive perception of service quality. Sales personnel unequivocally accentuated their potential to augment customer service but revealed conditions that limit optimal performance. Representatives of industry acknowledged areas of concern and recommended concerted effort by retailers due to their direct interaction with consumers as well as personnel.



The findings of this study provide invaluable evidence that consumers “not necessarily know what they do not know”. Shortcomings in the customer service in retail are revealed and guidelines are provided to augment the service offering to the benefit of the parties involved.



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