

## The Effectiveness of Customer Service Training Interventions – A Systematic Review of the Literature

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### ABSTRACT

Customer Service (CS) training interventions are viewed as a core requirement for frontline staff in the services industry. This study sought to identify the effectiveness of CS interventions to improve CS initiatives in the South African tourism, hospitality and retail industries. A search of the relevant literature was conducted using the Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta- Analysis (PRISMA) Guidelines. Peer-reviewed studies were identified using a comprehensive search strategy in four electronic databases namely Ebscohost, Jstor, Scencedirect and GoogleScholar. Three overarching themes identified in CS training interventions were the shift from training to personal transformation or employee empowerment, behaviour modelling of CS behaviours by employees who had not attended the interventions, and the use of self-management techniques.

### LITERATURE REVIEW

In an era of intensified competition for all businesses, Customer Service (CS) is now recognised as a key driver of competitive advantage (Kandampully and Duddy, 2001; Karmarkar, 2004). Whereas competing service companies are often identical in terms of facilities, equipment and service menus, customers continue to distinguish differences in the quality of service they receive. As a result, customers' personal interactions with frontline staff during the service

encounter is often the differentiating factor between companies boasting similar service environments and equipment (Zeithmal, 1990 and Weitzel et al., 1989 in Sulek, Lind & Maruchek, 1995). Preceding research (Chase & Bowen, 1991; Bitner, 1990, Berry et al., 1988, Cronin and Taylor, 1992 in Sulek et al., 1995) indicates that the customer and employee interaction can have a substantial effect on customer satisfaction and sales performance, thereby highlighting the business imperative for CS interventions.

### METHOD

A search of electronic databases was conducted in October 2015 to assess evidence-based research on CS interventions in organisations using the Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta-Analysis (PRISMA) Guidelines (Moher, Liberati, Tetzlaff, Altman, & PRISMA Group, 2009). Peer-reviewed studies were identified using a comprehensive search strategy in four electronic databases namely Ebscohost, Jstor, Scencedirect and GoogleScholar. One single coder was used for scoring and assessment, and results were assessed by the team to reduce selection bias. A wide array of search terms were used to ensure all relevant articles were captured. Search terms included: 'CS, casino industry, casino, service industry, CS programme, CS intervention, CS training, service industry, hospitality industry. Study selection was based primarily on whether the study included an evaluation of a CS intervention. Initially studies that were carried out in South Africa

were searched for, as well as studies conducted in the casino industry, however, due to a lack of studies being produced in search results, geographic location, industry and time period were not used as factors for omission. All studies that met the inclusion criteria were captured. The database search identified 3174 studies. 14 studies were found eligible for the review, however after a systematic screening process (see Figure 1), five studies were included in the review due not including interventions (n = 5), being industry magazine articles (n = 3) or the study being conducted in a unique setting (n = 1). Thematic analysis was used to identify common themes that emerged from the data.

## **DISCUSSION**

A conceptual understanding of the reviewed articles points to three levels that CS interventions impact. These are the individual level, the situational level and the organisational level. Individual level factors which have an effect on how employees respond to CS interventions include intrinsic motivation, capability, self-efficacy, organisational commitment, affective and normative orientation, autonomy and hierarchical trust. Situational level factors include how employees respond during the customer-employee interaction. Here aspects such as communication skills such as language, greeting, body language and the ability to improvise as well as self-management and responding to and dealing with customer's, as well as one's own emotions and moods, are brought into light. Organisational level factors include management commitment to CS, CS climate, alignment of HR systems and organisational processes with CS strategy as well as customer expectations generated through feedback mechanisms.

There were three overarching themes identified across studies. Both the interventions by Sturdy (2000) and Pattni (2007) entailed interventions that sought to foster employee empowerment. This also speaks to the shift from training to character formation or personal

transformation as mentioned by Sturdy (2000). Other themes that were identified were Behaviour Modelling of CS behaviours by staff who had not attended the interventions as well as the use of self-management techniques in CS interventions. The study by Rice (2009) illustrated the positive impact of managerial task clarification and social praise on frontline CS behaviours, thus pointing to the importance of supervisory feedback in reinforcing appropriate CS behaviours. In addition, both studies by Pattni (2007) and Rice (2009) entailed a degree of behaviour modelling where new employees who did not attend the training were mirroring CS behaviours of participants. The findings, of improved performance in untrained staff, are congruent with Bandura's social cognitive theory which forms the theoretical foundations of behaviour modelling training (BMT). Robertson (1990) notes that BMT perceives individual behaviour as a function of both internal characteristics such as cognition, attitudes, and personality, and external, situational variables. Social cognitive theorists disagree with the notion that only direct and personal experiences influence behaviour but instead have proven empirically that people will learn and change their behaviour after observing the behaviours of others; people can learn vicariously (Robertson, 1990; Taylor, Chan and Russ-Eft, 2005).

## **RECOMMENDATIONS**

This systematic review found a significant gap in the literature to provide guidance to SA organisations in the services industry in terms of CS interventions, and remains a concern considering the poor service standards apparent in the South African services industry (Blem, 2005). As a result, it is recommended that further research is conducted in South African service orientated industries such as retail, hospitality and tourism, to develop locally designed CS training interventions that, as identified in the five reviewed papers, adopt approaches to CS interventions emphasizing personal transformation, employee

empowerment, and self-management techniques, and seek to exploit the benefits of behaviour modelling. More importantly, this study calls for further research to identify how cultural values can be mobilised to enhance service interactions in the South African services sector in order to gain a competitive advantage over international tourism markets.

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