Innovations

Understanding the Customer Relations Services of Enugu Electricity Distribution and Port Harcourt Electricity Distribution Companies in the Post-Privatization Era in Nigeria

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Abstract: The study sought to ascertain the Customer Relations Services of EEDC and PHEDC in the postprivatisation era in Nigeria. The survey research design was adopted to examine the relationship between the way customers of EEDC and PHEDC perceive their services. The 15,085,000 population of study consists of all customers of EEDC and PHEDC. A sample of 385 was drawn using an Australian online sample size calculator. The questionnaire and in-depth interview guide were used to simultaneously generate the quantitative and qualitative data. These were presented and analysed using charts. Findings show that EEDC/PHEDC adopt customer relations strategies in their services, but the strategies are ineffective. The study also showed that majority of the respondents find the Customers Relations unit of EEDC and PHEDC unfriendly and uncourteous in dealing with customers. Based on these findings, the researcher recommends among others, that the Customer Relations unit of electricity distribution companies should try to conduct an inquiry to know the various needs of their customers so as to enable them design an implementable customer relations strategy.

Keywords: Customer Relations, Delivery and Satisfaction

Introduction

Having a strong customer relations department that can guarantee client pleasure and preserve positive customer connections is one of any organization's fundamental goals. The existence of clients and meeting their requirements is the only goal of every organization. According to Akpan (2000), a company's main objective should be to meet the needs of its consumers and make sure that the necessary resources are made available. Maintaining a strong relationship with the customer is one of the ways this may be accomplished. Management of companies has sought over the years to develop and innovate ways to keep the loyalty of its customers to boost service delivery.

Customer relationship management (CRM) has taken precedence in corporate plans as a means of enhancing client service delivery and guaranteeing customer happiness. In Okeke, Karakostas (2005) (2014). CRM is a thorough strategy and procedure that helps a business to find, get, and keep profitable clients. The goal of CRM's all-encompassing strategy is to improve relationships with each and every customer. According to a

study by Hallowell (1996) in Onyebuchi (2013) on the relationship between customer relations, customer loyalty, and profitability, an organization's profit can only rise as a result of an improvement in customer satisfaction if the company's technological and environmental conditions remain stable.

Most businesses have turned to fulfilling and satisfying consumer wants by not just being reactive but proactive in order to win customers and urge them to repurchase the service (Okeke, 2014). They are curious in fresh approaches to gratifying their customers. An organization can improve its reputation with customers by maintaining good customer relations. Williams, Ogege, and Ideji (2014) claim that customer relations aid staff in any organization's ability to solve problems and multi-task in tasks like traversing complicated databases and switching between many computers to obtain information for customers who are on the phone. In addition, providing excellent customer service is another approach to keep clients coming back despite the difficulties they encounter. This suggests that businesses who provide good customer relations services have a propensity to thrive more quickly than those that don't. According to Okeke (2014), who supports the aforementioned viewpoint, providing clients with services before, during, and after a transaction constitutes customer relations service. In a similar vein, Chinunda (2014) makes the claim in Okeke (supra) that customer relations services allow businesses to meet the demands and desires of their clients.

Customer relations are an important aspect of business operations that can have an impact on your bottom line and how the public perceives your firm. They go beyond simply being kind to your customers. Therefore, it is the responsibility of the customer relations team to maintain the organization's positive reputation before customers.

Given the value of customer relationships and the services they provide, the Enugu Electricity Distribution Company (EEDC) and Port Harcourt Electricity Distribution (PHEDC), two Electricity Distribution Companies (DISCOs) established following the privatization exercise and tasked with supplying electricity to the South-East and South-South states of Nigeria, have come under intense public scrutiny and have recognized the need for the establishment of new customer relations programs.

Objectives of the study

The study is guided by the following objectives:

- Ascertain the customer relations strategies employed by EEDC and PHED in dealing with customers' complaints.
- Determine the manner the customer relations' units of EEDC and PHED respond to customers' complaints.
- Examine the perception of customers about EEDC and PHED customers' relations activities.
- Ascertain the degree of satisfaction customers of EEDC and PHED get from customer relations' units.

Literature Review

Understanding the concept of customer relations

Customer relations is a subfield of public relations that has caught the interest of businesses. It is a department within an organization tasked with creating positive customer relationships and displaying the organization's image in front of the general public. Client relationship management, relationship marketing, relationship optimization, customer care, and customer service are other names for customer relations. (Bitpipe, 2012) in (Onyebuchi, 2013).

The organization's public face is represented by the customer relations team. They put in a lot of effort to close the communication and information gap. Assuring "two-way communication and feedback between the organization and its publics" is the responsibility of public relations (Okafor, 2006, p.49).

Creating a thoughtful communication strategy to portray the business as dependable, consistent, adaptable, and socially responsible to the society in which it operates is another fundamental purpose of public relations. Okafor (2006, p. 51) elaborated that customer relations ensures that the organization and her employees establish a strong relationship that is born out of understanding and empathy with the community neighbors of the organization in order to further explain the social responsibility of an organization. In order to recognize customer demands and work toward addressing them, customer relations, which is a crucial component of an organization's success, needs to be prioritized at the outset of interactions with customers (Onyebuchi, 2013).

Adiele and Gabriel (2013) provided additional support for this viewpoint when they wrote that "understanding customer needs and providing value-added services are recognized as aspects that affect the success or failure of firms." As businesses look to increase their profit through enduring ties with clients, customer relations are crucial.

Service Quality

Organizations now recognize service quality measurement as a measurement instrument for determining the needs and desires of customers. Scholars have demonstrated that there isn't any specific paradigm for gauging service quality (Ghotbadi, Feiz&Baharun, 2015). In order to increase efficiency and quality in order to satisfy customer expectations, service quality helps heads of corporate organizations to identify issues with the service offered to clients. Outstanding service quality is a crucial feature for service providers, especially when it comes to competition. Organizations should consider how customers perceive the services they receive for efficient service delivery in order to improve services, satisfy current customers, and attract new clients.

Organizations need a comprehensive methodology to measure how customers perceive the quality of the services for these goals. Service quality can assist service providers in identifying their strengths and shortcomings in relation to the requirements and preferences of their clients.

The following models for evaluating service quality were emphasized by Ghotbabadi, Setareh, and Baharun (2015, p. 271). The models listed below were created by various scholars.

Service Quality Gap Model, Gronroos Model, SERVQUAL Model, and SERVPERF Model.

Customer Satisfaction

Customer satisfaction is described as essential to the welfare of individual customers, to the profits of businesses supported by consumer spending and patronage, and to the stability of economic and political structures (Oliver, 1997) in (Kim & Cho, 2015). A person's judgment of the services that an organization has provided to them in accordance to their expectations can determine whether they are satisfied with their experience, which can either satisfy them or not. Ogbechi, Okafor, and Onifade (2018), citing Shanukh and Sehrish (2012), concur with the aforementioned viewpoint, so: A person's satisfaction is determined by how they feel after comparing a service performance to their expectations. A customer's decision to stick with a brand and even consider switching brands is an emotional one.

Exploring the linkages between customer relations, service quality and customer satisfaction

As was previously stated, maintaining good customer relations is crucial for businesses since it encourages the development of relationships that will last over time and be advantageous to both the company and the clients. Customer pleasure is one of the key results of marketing efforts (Oliver, 1980; Surprenant& Churchill, 1982; Spreng et al, 1996; Mick & Fournier, 1999 in Saddiqi, 2011 p.11). When a customer is pleased with a business's goods or services, they make sure that their friends and family use those goods and services as well (File &Prince, 1992).

Customers' loyalty and "more positive word of mouth communication" are two benefits that businesses with higher levels of customer satisfaction might experience (Gever, 2022; Khadkha & Maharjan, 2017 p.6). They contend that when a customer is pleased with the company's goods or services, they are more likely to make repeated purchases and recommend the business to other people. If the demands of the customers are ignored, no business can succeed. Customers are always seen as the greatest p ublics and rulers (Saddiqi, 2011; Onyebuchi, 2013).

The degree to which a business is able to meet the needs of its customers has been linked to its success. The c ustomer relations manager of a business must make sure to promise what they can deliver and deliver more t han they have promised in an effort to satisfy the expectations of the customers (Kotler, 2006 in Adusei, nd).

When a product's performance falls short of the customer's expectations, the customer is unsatisfied; neverth eless, when performance matches the customer's expectations, the customer is satisfied (Kotler, Bowen &Mak ens, 2006 in Adusei, nd)

Review of empirical studies: Impact of Customer relations on performance and Organisational growth

In this section of the study, the researcher looked into earlier empirical studies that, in terms of content and design, are comparable to the current one. According to a study by Hassan (2013) titled "Customer service and Organizational growth of service firm in Somalia," excellent service delivery, service speed, and responsiveness to customers' requests will all contribute to organization growth.

Effects of Customer service on Organizational Performance of Telecommunication Companies in Mogadishu, Somalia, is the title of another related study by Aden and Gichinga (2016). Poor customer service and poor customer relationship management were noted in the report as problems facing telecommunications companies. However, their research showed that "customer service delivery, customer happiness, customer relationship management, and quality of service delivery affect the organizational of telecommunication enterprises in Mogadishu."

In addition, a study published in 2015 by Jeske, Chimusoro, and Karodia under the title "An Evaluation of Customer Service and the Impact of Efficiency on Namibia's Logistical Sector: A Study involving Selected Courier Companies," the authors sought, among other things, to learn what customers expected from customer service and how well it was currently being provided. The main conclusions are that there is opportunity for improvement in the customer relations service providers in order to improve customer service delivery. According to the study's findings, customer relations representatives should be dispatched for "training and creating connections with customers." This conclusion implies that certain customer care representatives lack the competencies necessary for efficient service delivery.

Customer relations, service quality and customer satisfaction

A study entitled "The Effect of Service Quality on Customer Satisfaction in the Utility Industry - A Case of Vodafone (Ghana)" was undertaken by Agyapong in 2011. Results indicate a correlation between client satisfaction and the quality of the services provided. In an effort to make services more tangible for clients, it is crucial to increase personnel competence. The study also finds that "competence, civility, tangibility, reliability, responsiveness, and communication" are elements that affect service quality. According to the study's findings, providing good customer service involves "offering the customer what they want and when they want it" (Agyapong, 2011 p. 207).

According to results of a related study by Geetika (2010) titled "Determinants of Customer Satisfaction on Service Quality: A Study on Railway Platforms in India," it is essential to effectively disseminate information if you want to satisfy your customers. The effectiveness of the information system and staff behavior are some of the elements highlighted for achieving customer satisfaction, per the study's findings. Customers are more worried about staff behavior than anything else. In order to improve their services, railway officials are advised to implement the variables highlighted by the study.

Theoretical review

Expectancy Disconfirmation theory

Richard L. Oliver developed this model in 1977 to assess customer satisfaction in relation to perceived service. Customer decision-making is greatly influenced by expectations. The customer satisfaction process theory that is most widely accepted is this one. According to the theory, a customer's satisfaction or dissatisfaction is determined by how well a product or service performs in comparison to predetermined performance standards. The view holds that the customer's predictive expectations are the predetermined standards. There are three possible results from the comparison. When performance exceeds predetermined expectations, positive disconfirmation happens. The customer is happy in this instance. When performance is deemed to be exactly in line with expectations, there is zero disconfirmation, and customers are likely to be happy. The last step is a negative confirmation

Methodology

The research design adopted for this study was survey. Survey was applied because the nature of the study calls for the need to solicit people's opinion which is the hall mark of survey. The instrument for data collection was the questionnaire and interview guide. The questionnaire copies were distributed to the respondents through the aid of research assistants who were duly trained.

Population of study

The target population of this study are customers of EEDC and PHEDC which is 15,085,000.

Sample size

The sample size for this study was determined using the Australian National Statistical Service (NSS) online sample size calculator with confidence level of 95% and confidence interval of 0.05 which gave 385. Out of the 385, 382 were returned and thus used for the analysis.

Data Presentation and analysis

Research Question One: What customer relations strategies are employed by EEDC and PHEDC in dealing with customers' complaints?

In response to research question one, qualitative data were generated from in-depth interview held with six staff of the customers' relations units on EEDC and PHEDC in Enugu and Port Harcourt respectively. From all the responses, they outlined; communicating frequently, holding special events and building two-way customer service as some of the strategies they employ in their services. This finding is supported by Anyim and Egeruo (2016), according to them, a company may have beautiful strategies but if not properly implemented will make the entire company look ineffective.

Research Question Two: In what manner do the customer relations' units of EEDC and PHEDC respond to customers' complaints?

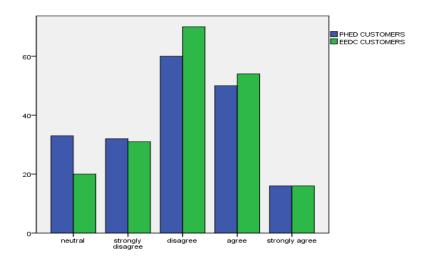


Table above shows that CR staff are not friendly and cheerful in their response, 40(10.5%) respondent strongly agree CR staff are friendly and cheerful in their response, 72(18.8%) respondents agree that CR staff are friendly and cheerful in their response. But 82(21.5%) respondent disagree CR staff are friendly and cheerful in their response, 124(32.5%) respondent have strong disagreement that CR staff are friendly and cheerful in their response, 16.8% of respondent are uncertain if CR staff are friendly and cheerful in their response. This implies that majority of the respondents strongly believe that CR staff are not friendly and cheerful in their response to request because of the nature of job. The result here corroborates the findings of Adedeji (2017) who stated that customer relations staff are not courteous.

Research Question Three: What is the perception of customers about EEDC and PHEDC customer relations activities?

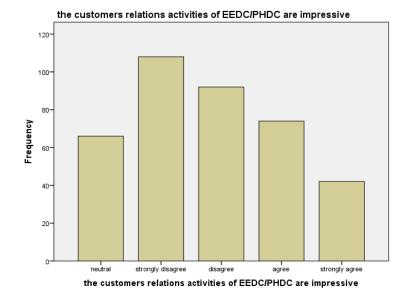
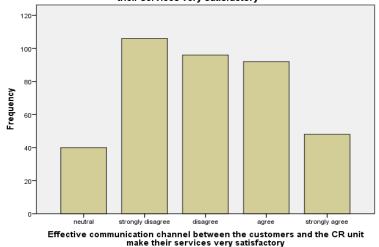


Table above shows the customers relations activities of EEDC/PHEDC are impressive, 42(11.0%) respondents strongly agree that the customers relations activities of EEDC/PHEDC are impressive, 74(19.4%) respondents agree that the customers relations activities of EEDC/PHEDC are impressive, 92(24.1%) respondents disagree that the customers relations activities of EEDC/PHEDC are impressive, 108(28.3%) respondents strongly disagree that the customers relations activities of EEDC/PHEDC are impressive. This implies that majority of respondent strongly disagree that the customers relations activities of EEDC/PHEDC are impressive. This implies that majority of respondent strongly disagree that the customers relations activities of EEDC/PHEDC are impressive because takes a long time before the company fixes problem complained about and electricity supply is not stable. This findings is in line with the comments of Okolobah and Ismail (2013) and Awosope (2014), they argued that most customer relations unit of public or semi-public companies and offices are not impressive with their daily activities.

Research Question Four: What degree of satisfaction do customers of EEDC and PHEDC get from the customer relations' units?



Effective communication channel between the customers and the CR unit make their services very satisfactory

Table above shows how effective communication channel between the customers and the CR unit make their services very satisfactory. 48(12.6%)respondents strongly agree that respondents think that effective communication channel between the customers and the CR unit make their services very satisfactory, 92(25.1%) respondents agree that effective communication channel between the customers and the CR unit make their services very satisfactory, 96(25.1%) respondents disagree that the effective communication channel between the customers and the CR unit make their services very satisfactory, 96(25.1%) respondents disagree that the effective communication channel between the customers and the CR unit make their services very satisfactory, 106(27.7%) respondents strongly disagree that the effective communication channel between the customers and the CR unit make their services very satisfactory. This implies that majority of the respondents strongly disagree that the effective communication channel between the CR unit make their services very satisfactory. This implies that majority of the respondents strongly disagree that the effective communication channel between the customers and the CR unit make their services very satisfactory. This implies that majority of the respondents strongly disagree that the effective communication channel between the customers and the CR unit make their services very satisfactory. This finding completely agrees with the submissions of Aden and Gichinga (2016), where they insist that the customer relations units of most companies don't give the customers the satisfaction they desire.

Conclusion

The study concludes that there is a close relationship between the way customers of both EEDC and PHEDC perceive the effectiveness or the ineffectiveness of their customer relations services.

It is necessary to add that Electricity Distribution Companies (DISCOs) should pay attention to the design and implementation of their customer relations strategies because the way they are designed and implemented do not indicate that customers are completely satisfied with the outcomes. These strategies might seem wonderful in the eyes of the companies because they are out to make profit but might not be the direct reflection of the customers whose needs are to be met. There is no doubt that most of these strategies adopted by these DISCOs are well-thought out but they do not reflect the need of the customer, who is expected to be satisfied through customer relations.

Recommendations

Based on the findings of the study, the following recommendations were made:

- It is recommended that the CR units of electricity distribution companies should try to conduct an inquiry to know the various needs of their customers so as to enable them design an implementable customer relations' strategy.
- It is also recommended that some of the customer relations strategies that are already in place be made more participatory so that customers would have the impression that their needs are the rationale behind the privatization of the DISCOs. This will offer the customers the opportunity to visit the CR units to make their complaints.
- The study also revealed that the CR staff of DISCOs are not friendly and courteous in dealing with the customers. It is therefore recommended that the CR staff should engage more in the area of Customer Relationship Management (CRM). This will in turn improve service delivery and boost customer satisfaction.

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