

# Managing Emotional Connect between Front-Line Employee and Customers

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## **Abstract**

Customer experience plays a vital role in expanding the success criteria service organizations for its competitive growth. Collaborative studies linking dimension of Human Resource Management, Strategic Management and Customer Relationship discern the dynamic role of front-line employees and effect of their behaviour on overall customer perception built towards organization. Existing framework identifies role of front-line employees as important for building positive experience since they are in direct contact with potential segment on daily basis. Communication skills, motives, satisfaction, retention are few of the established dimension influencing employee-customer relationship. The proposed model in this study instigates the role of employee's emotional facet as an influential dimension affecting customer's service quality perception. Both customer and employee perspective are measured to determine the combined influential results in healthcare sector. A set of structured questionnaire is designed to collect data from customer as well the front-line employees. Hypothesis is tested and results are predicted using multivariate analysis techniques. The study emphasis on managing the emotional dimension of empathy among employees to increase the role efficiency and manage service quality perception among the customers.

**Keywords:** Front-line Employees, Emotions, Empathy, Service Quality, Customer Perception

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## **Introduction**

Organizational changing dynamics and shifting consumer demand paradigms have commanded a differential focused strategy to cater the competitive growth and challenges. Technological intervention has resulted in a great leap of shift in customer centric strategy from creating value to relationship building wherein employees have become an integral element. Early managerial implications have focused on delivering value based services through cost : benefit ratio (Hooper et. al., 2001; Lee and Cunningham, 2001; Lu and Zhang, 2003; Edward and Sahadev, 2011). However, with increased competition and increased cost in managing the brand difference, organizations are now focusing to build strong relational ties (Bowen and McCain, 2015; Cheung and To, 2015; Kim et.al. 2015). The emphasis is on creating trained, motivated and committed front-line

employees as a medium to achieve higher market share and relative sustenance. Such front-line employees are the huge asset for service based organizations playing vital role in building brand-image, communicating and managing organizational-customer bond.

Early studies clarify the role of employee's behavioral and psychological dimension as an integral factor influencing customer overall experience in the service arena (Robertson, 1994; Pate et. al. 2003; Henkel et. al. 2007; Jayawardhena and Farrell, 2011). Positive delightful experience with the service area affects consumer's cognitive evaluation process and thereby influence their consumption behaviour with the service organization (Grace and O'Cass, 2004; Keng et. al. 2007; McGuire et. al. 2010). Set of both positive and negative experiences are evaluated to form consumer attitude and perception towards quality of service provided and consumed by them (Choraria, 2013). Construction of such emotional experiences are considerably influenced by the front-line employee's performance during comprehensive set of consumption process. However, construct of employee performance is never a stable state and fluctuate with time and mental state. Stress, work-life balance, motivation, role conflict are among identified factors affecting employee's performance during service discourse (Bashir and Ramay, 2010; Tang and Chang, 2010; Javed et. al. 2014; Kim, 2014). Therefore, several HR practices are recommended and have been introduced to manage high-performance stature among employees.

Major emphasis was given on exploring the factors and their impact affecting employee performance (Edwards, 1993; Yavas et. al. 2010; O'Halloran, 2012; Yavas et. al. 2013). However, with evolution of management studies and cross-link functioning, organizational strategy has deviated the focus demanding impact of employee behaviour on service brand image, organizational marketing activities, development of new product, consumer behaviour, organization's financial as well operational performance; and thereby overall organizational performance defining its competitive strength and value creation (McAfee and Champagne, 1993; Adsit et. al. 1996; Saban et. al., 2000; Yavas et al., 2010; de Waal, 2010; Akroush, 2012). Contributing to similar dimension of understanding and building cross-functional strategies, the proposed model examine the impact of employee related dimensions on consumer's service quality perception in the presence of customer orientation of Front-Line employees. The framework examines the impact of employee role stress, social skills and their decision making authority during service delivery process as variables affecting their quality of interaction with the customers which later defines the customer's perception towards the service quality. The managerial implications focuses upon providing improved service experience to the customers and managing their

expectations and retention with the organization.

### Literature Review

Increasing complexities and competition for survival as well to grow substantially, customers are placed at the center-stage of the business strategy. Shift from product to customer focused planning signify the increasing importance of customers, thereby shift in the power from organization to customer (Saarijarvi et al., 2013; Teoh and Pan, 2009). Managing customer expectation and satisfaction are in the central to manage retention of profitable base, especially in the service sector wherein employees plays a major role in managing customer emotions (Choraria and Sardana, 2013). Early study describes ten major factors like tangibility, reliability, responsiveness, communication, credibility, security, competence, courtesy, understanding/knowing the customer, and access influencing customer's perception towards the service quality (Brown et al., 1993; Cronin and Taylor, 1992; Parsuraman et al., 1994). These criteria signify the importance of both front-end and back-end employees and their responsive characteristics for the efficient and influencing service design. However, every customer is different and so they do not respond to the incident or service initiatives deliberately in an specifically uniform pattern (Crick and Spencer, 2011). The criticality of the incidence depends upon the degree of rapport shared by the customers with their respective organizations and their associated people. Therefore, service industry consist of a series of intangible activities wherein the service image formation depends upon quality of customer-organizational interaction through employee interaction (Gronroos, 2004). Service industry identifies these employees as a set of important organizational asset playing important role in implementing strategic decisions.

Researchers have claimed the conceptualization of building service quality perception as vital strategic decision within service organizations (Sivakumar et al., 2014; Wirtz et al., 2014). Conceptualization of service quality perception expresses the customer expectation within the mindset, playing a critical role in defining customer satisfaction with the service consumption (Bansal and Taylor, 2015; Janet, 2015; Oral and Kara, 2014). It is evaluated on the dimension of physical attributes of the servicescape and employee interactive attributes (both behavioral as well social). Employee's responsive, reliable and empathetic behaviour helps in building assurance among customers thereby developing customer perception. Thus, such customer perception is affected by their expectation and experience based on the standardized dimensions established in their mindset.

Several service based organization implies the importance of service employees as one of the primary contact point,

both during and after the service consumption, building service encounters for the customers (Bitner et al., 1990; Crosby et al., 1990). Such point-of-contact between service employee and the customer during service encounter proceeds with the formation of customer perception towards service quality. Formation of customer perception represents the perceived image of the organization in the minds of customer built during interaction. Fruitful interaction during urgency and service failure, between employee and customer build positive service atmosphere and results in managing customer emotions (Choraria, 2013; Padin et al., 2015; Surachartkumtonkun et al., 2015). Both customer satisfaction and experience influences customer's mindset and their evaluation stage in decision making process. The elements are also considered as a point-of-differentiation while building service image and positioning to cater the sustainable model design of organization. It plays a vital role in managing strategic approach towards competition and dynamic external environmental factors.

Recently with the increasing competitive scenario, organizations have build up a strong focus on developing the sustainable team of skilled employees along with designing the strategically competitive service landscape to build customer perception. Such discriminatory perceptual image is built as per functional, social and psychological dimension of the customer influenced by the organization (Cooper and Oddie, 1975; Gronroos, 2004; Mines and Mangold, 2004). Research in building theory of services marketing and establishing it with customer management vision, also establishes a conceptual model that articulates the nature and determine factors of customer expectations in relation to the service. These studies affirm the concepts of the level of service desired and the level of adequate service (Bove and Johnson, 2000; Heinonen et al, 2007; Madupalli and Poddar, 2014; Mickelsson, 2013; White and Yanamandaram, 2007; Zeithmal et al. 1993). The region between the two levels represents a zone of tolerance that the client permits as satisfactory for the service received. For the customers, the most important attributes of services has a narrower zone of tolerance. Therefore, to adequately maintain the competitive positioning, organization need to understand the degree of importance conferred by customers to the attributes that comprises and defines the organizational strength (Zeithaml and Bitner, 2003). Such exploration of the activities provides clarity towards roles and responsibilities shared and behavioral attitude among employees to maintain and improve the organizational market share as well the profit margins.

Dimensions like role clarity, decision making authority and social skills at workplace are given importance within service based organizations like banking industry which focus deliberately towards well-trained employee team to achieve customer satisfaction and thereby creating a strong

customer relationship bonding (Lohman, 2004; Manmohan et al., 2011; Teas et al., 1979; Tzu-Shian et al., 2010; Vázquez, 2004). Existing studies argued that understanding with the assigned roles and responsibility provides platform of clarity towards activities and level of interaction with customers among employees. Organizations with explicit clarification on working standards and profiled competencies requires detailed differentiation for various managerial roles and responsibilities. Such elucidated profiles provide standardization of services among employees balancing their workplace activities systematically (Gulbahar et. al., 2014; Jaisuria and Bhadra, 2014; Michel, 2014; Russo et al., 2015). Degree of contact and flow of information from employees to customers could therefore be well designed and managed accordingly. Organizations therefore focuses not only on training front-line employees, but also emphasis on consistent flow of communication across the hierarchies. This assures the understanding of organizational goal and objective behind designated roles and responsibility among people who represent organizational image to customers (Linke and Zarfass, 2011; Sharma and Kamalanabhan, 2012).

Employees, especially the front-line that comes in direct contact with the customer understand extent of their response during customer's service encounter and the power of decision making during critical incidences. Within most of the service organizations, customer appreciates quick response from the employees during service encounter. Fruitful decision making response by the employees that manages customer's negative emotions proves to be beneficial for ensuring organizational image (Choraria, 2013). It influences employees perception towards empowerment within hierarchical set-up and manages their satisfaction towards job, while customer's perception towards quick service response (Goris, 2007; Luoh et al., 2014; Ygil, 2006). Therefore, empowering employees, to take decisions during certain scenarios, is considered as a strategic tool to retain both employees and customers, thus building organizational equity.

Both role clarity and decision making power comprises organization's dynamic policy for its sustainable competitive growth, whereas, social skill-set among employees is considered as an vital element of behavioral display to manage balanced relationship with customers. Employee's social skill set in service organization demonstrate their ability to express, interact, and understand their customer as per social norms, beliefs and value system (Riggio and Richard, 2008; Tarricone and Luca, 2002). It is responsible for delivering organized communication process between employee and the customer/ consumer, representing organizational efficiency and effectiveness. Quality of social skill-set is based on social norms manifesting the acceptable and expected behavioral attitude

within the society and therefore represents an important dimension of behavioral intelligence (Li et al., 2012; Oxoby, 2009). Such established standards demands careful social expressions along with role clarity and decision making authority among employees to create an impressive image during customer interaction influencing their perception towards overall service quality.

### Research Methodology

Framework describes the impact of employee related variables on customers perception towards organization's service quality. The proposed model evaluates the development of service quality perception as per customer-employee interaction developing strategic relationship between employee and customer gaining competitive advantage. Sample population from banking sector is identified to measure the proposed hypothesis and examine their extent of influence. Both front-line employees and premium customers from privatized banks were identified to generate the pool of information. Convenience sampling method is used to approach the target population of 280 customers and 245 employees from Ahmedabad associated with the single organization since past 2 years. To measure the proposed relationships, questionnaire is developed using pre-defined scales by Zeithmal et al (1996), Donovan et al. (2004), Rizzo et al (1970), Baron and Markman (2003) and Cronin and Taylor (1992). Each variable consist of items measuring the said dimension among the target sample population were measured using likert scale (1= Strongly

Disagree----- 5= Strongly Agree). Data is collected through survey method wherein customers have encountered a certain situation which led to specific discussion with the bank employee. Further the responses were scrutinized to reduce the skewness of the data.

### Data Analysis and Discussion

The initial phase of data analysis comprises of developing and examining the reliability and validity of the overall scale. Pre-defined scales from earlier literature is used to develop items to measure variable in data collection instrument and is further scrutinized using expert opinion. Inter-item correlation is examined to define the associative relationship among scale items and were measured at 95% confidence interval. Later, factor scores are generated to define the operationalization of each variable and confirm validity of the scale (Table 1). Each variable explains the relationship within the target sample with an overall cumulative variance of 58% explained. Scale items scoring above 0.5 were retained confirming the validity of Factor analysis with 0.84 KMO score. Also, reliability of the scale is confirmed with the Cronbach's alpha value ranging from 0.7 to 0.9 for all the defined variables in the scale for data collection. Thus, the initial phase of the analysis confirms the usability of the data for further analyzing the proposed relationship among the variables and examine the hypothesis.

Table 1. Questionnaire Tool : Results of Factor Analysis and Reliability

Sr. No.	Dimension	Factor Scores	Reliability	% of Variance Explained
1.	Role Clarity			
	RC1	0.67		
	RC2	0.62		
	RC3	0.65		
	RC4	0.78		
	RC5	0.77		
	RC6	0.52		
	RC7	0.74		
	RC8	0.64		
	RC9	0.68		
	RC10	0.53		
			Cronbach's $\alpha =$ 0.68	28.2

2.	Decision Making Authority DM1 DM2 DM3 DM4 DM5 DM6 DM7 DM8 DM9	0.76 0.73 0.77 0.79 0.84 0.83 0.63 0.76 0.74	Cronbach's $\alpha$ = 0.76	12.5
3.	Social Skills SK1 SK2 SK3 SK4 SK5 SK6 SK7 SK8 SK9 SK10 SK11 SK12 SK13 SK14	0.55 0.72 0.69 0.63 0.58 0.52 0.68 0.66 0.64 0.68 0.78 0.78 0.75 0.77	Cronbach's $\alpha$ = 0.75	10.6

	Employee-Customer Interaction Quality			
	EC1	0.87	Cronbach's $\alpha$ = 0.84	16.6
	EC2	0.83		
	EC3	0.86		
	EC4	0.82		
	EC5	0.88		
	Service Quality Perception	0.69		
	SQ1	0.72	Cronbach's $\alpha$ = 0.78	22.9
	SQ2	0.66		
	SQ3	0.64		
	SQ4	0.73		
	SQ5	0.79		
	SQ6	0.73		
	SQ7	0.72		
	SQ8	0.69		
	SQ9	0.80		
	SQ10	0.74		
	SQ11	0.68		
	SQ12	0.74		
	SQ13	0.71		
	SQ14	0.82		
	SQ15	0.64		
	SQ16			

The two stage model explains the dimensions of both customer and employee and its overall effect on customer's evaluation and perception to service quality. The model not only examines the effect of variables but also focuses on measuring the degree of impact on employee interaction with customer and their evaluation for the overall service quality. Structural equation modeling is used to evaluate the relationship effect among the proposed dimensions during the occurrence of each stage. The initial phase of the stage

examines the effect of Employee related dimensions on Consumers Service Quality perception. Role Clarity, Decision Making Authority and Social Skill are identified as major influencing factors of employees affecting their interaction with the customer. Therefore these dimensions are identified as essential factors among skilled employees influencing customer's evaluation stage during service encounter.

Among the measured dimensions, Employee's Decision



Making Authority (0.64\*) was identified as the major factor affecting the quality of interaction followed with Social Skills (0.42\*) and Role Clarity (0.21\*). This indicates the importance of employee's quick response towards the situation and reducing the waiting time/ response time for the customers. The regression weighted score of the responses clearly explains the impact of the sense of decision making authority among the employees. Such organizational initiative reduces the lead time for customers and managing their state of satisfaction with the service consumption. Such positive emotional state of customer mind results in strong retention intention thereby contributing in managing the profitable market-share for the organization. Also, sense of power realization also induces the sense of responsibility which eventually results in empathetic decision by the employee.

Quality of customer-employee interaction is further influenced by employee's social skills and its timely display while dealing or managing the customers within the organizational set-up like banking sector. Social skills helps to create a flow of communication managing interest of involved people into it. It determines the smooth interaction among employee and customer managing the clientele relation by establishing the environment of personalization through social relationship and social support system. through the display of behavioural intelligence, employees, therefore, manages customer's expectation and build an emotional connect to create fair-image towards the organizational services. However, importance of role clarity among employees was identified as considerably less effective in building customer relationships comparative to other dimensions. Earlier literature emphasis the role of job clarity among employees as dimension for employee motivation to work as well employee satisfaction to retain with the organization for longer. However, longevity with the organization and long-term association of the employee increases employee's affect building emotional connect with the organization. Such emotional organizational bonding influences the overall performance of the employee, making them more responsible and devoted towards organizational success. Therefore, clarity in the job among employee indirectly influence the overall employee-customer relationship quality which is visibly evident in the suggested substitute model.

Owing to the increased competitive and dynamic service platform, organizations have categorized the skill set for the front-line employees who are in direct contact with the customers and thence affecting the overall perception towards the service organization. Through the atmospherics, service landscape and a team of skilled employee, organization focuses on developing positive perception towards service quality. The second stage of the proposed model explaining the impact of employee-customer

interaction on customer's overall service quality (0.78\*\*) evaluation and thus build the further understanding for the managers the importance of motivated and satisfied skilled employees. However, while individually examining the factors, Responsiveness (0.84\*) and Reliability (0.77\*\*) were identified the most influenced dimensions that affects the overall evaluation of the service quality among the customers towards the organization. The model thus provide an important dimension linking employee and customer to achieve sustainable competitive long-term positioning. The proposed framework emphasize on developing the strong organizational focus towards its employees to provide them clarity towards their roles and responsibility thereby enabling them to take better decisions during their interaction with the clients/ customers. Such organizational initiative not only develops the strong associative feeling among employees but also improves the quality of productivity and thereby influencing the end-user's perception towards the organization.

The validity of the model is measured through the scores obtained through measurement model sufficing the threshold criteria. The study considered the scores of  $X^2/DF= 1.83$ ,  $RMR=.05$ ,  $RMSEA=.07$ ,  $GFI=.89$ ,  $TLI=.84$ ,  $CFI=.94$ ,  $IFI=.92$ ,  $NFI=.90$  to determine the validity for the proposed and thereby measured relationships.

### Conclusion

The model predicts the impact of employee's personal as well as social factors influencing the interaction quality which eventually builds positive service quality perception. Further quantification of the model to study the impact on individual dimension of service quality, however, reveals incomplete information of variable interaction.

Banking sector has seen an immense growth during the course of changing Indian economy. Increased in the number of competitors, customer expectation and extensive portfolios has resulted in strategic approach to manage the profitable customer base. This requires the 360 degree organizational approach considering both macro and micro environments affecting the sustainable competitive positioning within the sector. Both employees and customers have become equivalently important for the service firms like banking sector wherein the organizational image is heavily dependent upon the performance and behavioral attitude of the front-line employees. Based on the proposed model, the results builds a bridge on developing healthy customer relationships by managing the skill sets of the employees through role clarity. Also, providing them an access to make certain level of decision further improve the process and customer perception towards the service quality.

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