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Exploring the mystery of service satisfaction

Abstract

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Exploring the mystery of service satisfaction

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Introduction

Customer satisfaction surveys and other feedback systems provide data and information on a range of service elements, however, they are limited in the insights they can provide into the total service experience, in particular the influence of staff attitudes, attributes and behaviours on overall satisfaction. Feedback from surveys does of course offer clues to guide further investigation. Mystery shopping was chosen by the University of Wollongong Library (UWL) to shed light on the value customers place on various aspects of their service interactions. The Customer Satisfaction Survey discussed in this paper was developed by an Australian company, Rodski Survey and Behavioural Research, in consultation with a number of university libraries. It is discussed in the context of UWL's overall performance and management framework: the Australian Business Excellence Framework.

UWL has long looked to service excellence and quality as distinguishing characteristics in an increasingly competitive, and hence customer focused, environment. In 1994 UWL decided to adopt a total quality management approach to achieving its service excellence and quality goals by implementing the Australian Business Excellence Framework (ABEF), as described in McGregor (2003) and McGregor (2004). The framework mandates the integration of all aspects of organisational management and development in order to achieve its goals of service excellence and quality. The ABEF comprises seven interrelated categories: Leadership; Strategy and Planning; Knowledge and Information; People; Customer and Market Focus; Innovation; Quality and Improvement; and Success and Sustainability. The framework is underpinned by twelve principles of business excellence which, in essence, are statements of good leadership and management practices. The adoption of the ABEF was influenced by its potential to provide evaluation through the associated Australian Business Excellence Awards, a rigorous assessment process requiring stringent evidence of planning, process, outcomes and evaluation, including internal and external benchmarking.

Customer satisfaction surveys have been conducted at UWL since 1995 enabling internal benchmarking. Since 2002, UWL has participated in a customer satisfaction survey negotiated by CAUL (Council of Australian University Libraries). Since 1995 CAUL has sponsored the development of a number of performance indicators measuring, for example, materials availability and document delivery. In 2000, it was decided to replace an earlier 'client congruence' indicator with a commercial instrument, the Rodski Customer Satisfaction Survey (hereafter referred to as 'Rodski'). A consortium arrangement was negotiated and Rodski was adopted by 37 of Australia's 39 university libraries, plus four New Zealand university libraries. This was a

milestone achievement, facilitating informal benchmarking of performance and cross-organisational learning across the sector for the first time.

Rodski identifies gaps between importance and performance across the major assessment categories of: *communication, service quality, service delivery, facilities and equipment* and *library staff*. Institutional survey results are communicated via the Rodski web portal and the service includes identification of the top performers in each of the five broad categories. The Rodski survey allows free text comments which can be grouped and analysed. Data and information collected from the survey are used by UWL to inform planning and improvement initiatives across all levels of the Library. As is common with broad perception surveys, the information is often not sufficiently detailed to implement specific improvements, for example, the oft-repeated comment: 'more resources needed'. Like many libraries, UWL uses additional tools and techniques to elicit the information needed to address satisfaction gaps. These include focus groups, online and print feedback mechanisms, specific service surveys and process measurement.

As prescribed by the ABEF, the interaction and interrelationship between categories are important determinants of successful outcomes. In the context of this paper, the interaction of the Australian Business Excellence Framework's 'People' and 'Customer and Market Focus' categories is of primary importance. Research demonstrating correlations between staff satisfaction and customer satisfaction (Heskett et al, 1997, Rucci et al, 1998), appears to be both interesting and relevant to the issues discussed in this paper. Rucci describes a model implemented at Sears Roebuck and cites data leading him to conclude that "unless you have a trained, literate, motivated, competent work force and give them decision-making authority, you don't get satisfied customers." (p2). Decision-making authority is one aspect of empowerment, a concept which is touched on later in this paper.

Human resources management and development have long been strengths of UWL, as recognised by its accreditation against the Investors in People (IIP) standard since 1999. The IIP provides for an annual review process to maintain accreditation. HR plans and policies are designed to foster the commitment and involvement of every staff member, as well as enabling their professional and personal development. In order to evaluate the effectiveness of these practices and to gain some measure of staff satisfaction, a Staff Perceptions Survey (SPS) has been administered biennially since 1996. The survey is designed to capture perceptions about the adequacy of communication, availability of training and support, organisational relationships and health and wellbeing. It also includes a section on customer service which asks staff to rate their perceptions of, for example, whether they possess the necessary skills to provide excellent service, and whether they are enthusiastic and receptive when dealing with customers. Another purpose of the survey is to assess how well agreed values have been incorporated in practice. The SPS is one element in a suite of indicators designed to measure what has been termed the 'Ideal Culture', which is discussed later in this paper.

Why Mystery Shopping?

UWL has used Rodski twice, in 2002 and 2004. Although placed in the top quartile of the Customer Satisfaction Survey when benchmarked against all

participating libraries, UWL considered that it should be performing more strongly, given its long-term commitment to service quality and excellence. Often, when satisfaction levels are high, it is difficult to isolate the specific aspects of service which customers believe could be improved. UWL is a medium-sized, relatively new regional university and does not expect to perform at the top in terms of resources, facilities or equipment. It does aspire, however to perform in the top five in the other categories. The 'Library Staff' and 'Service Delivery' categories in particular were targeted, as UWL was ranked 14th and 11th respectively in the 2002 survey.

As an accredited 'Investor in People' and recipient of an Australian Business Excellence Award, which includes assessment of human resources planning, policies, results and improvement, UWL had an expectation of a high level of satisfaction in the evaluation of staff performance and service delivery. Although this expectation was largely realised, improvement opportunities were actively sought. The free text comments concerning staff in the Rodski survey were almost universally positive, so there were few clues there. Similarly, the self-rankings in the Customer Service section of the Staff Perceptions Survey were high and provided insufficient guidance for improvement action. The IIP reports were consistently glowing and the improvement opportunities identified in ABEF assessments had been implemented. A customer service award, which has been a component of the internal rewards and recognition program since 1995, has recognised commitment to client service.

One source of possible improvement was a survey conducted by the Council of Australian University Librarians' (CAUL) Best Practice Working Group. The survey was informally structured. Libraries represented in the top five in each of the broad Rodski survey categories were asked to provide insights into, for example, the key distinguishing factors in their service performance and improvements they had made in response to customer feedback. Although very interesting and useful information was obtained in this way and several improvements were introduced at UWL as a consequence, there were no practices considered sufficiently significant to explain the disparity in performance ratings. Obviously, contextualisation of the data in terms of library size, age, population characteristics and survey timing needed to be taken into account but did not affect the determination to improve UWL's position.

A more detailed and informative means of gathering further data on the human elements of the service transaction which may influence customer perception of satisfaction was therefore sought. Benchmarking with award-winning organisations, both public and private is a continuing aspect of involvement with the Australian Business Excellence Framework. Through this network, mystery shopping, a tool commonly used in the retail and hospitality industries, was selected for its potential applicability to library service assessment and its congruence with three of the twelve business excellence principles which underpin the ABEF:

- Understanding what clients value, now and in the future, influences organizational direction, strategy and action
- The potential of an organisation is realised through its people's enthusiasm, resourcefulness and participation
- Continual improvement and innovation depend on continual learning.

The primary aim of UWL's mystery shopping, therefore, was to assess how well the agreed values of the library and their associated behaviours were being practised, how these behaviours affected customer satisfaction and whether improvement would translate into improved satisfaction ratings. Specific objectives included assessment of a cross-section of services, service attributes, knowledge and skills. It was anticipated findings would result in process improvement, training and development and even organisational strategy, as articulated in the business excellence principles above. At the time the exercise was developed, no studies of other libraries using mystery shopping were discovered.

Subsequently, a literature search located a paper on the use of mystery shopping in public libraries (Calvert, 2004) which describes the generic mystery shopping process and the experience of a number of New Zealand's public libraries which have used this tool. Many of these libraries' mystery shopping aims were similar to those of UWL.

Ideal Culture

Specifically for UWL, there was a desire to test how well the Ideal Culture, mentioned above, had been assimilated into service behaviour and attitudes. The Ideal Culture originated at a facilitated team-building workshop for the Library's executive committee. The ideas developed there were subsequently workshopped with all staff, with the aim of gaining consensus and commitment to the model. The Ideal Culture describes the working environment which UWL aspires to achieve, an environment in which every staff member strives to uphold agreed values, is actively developing identified Personal Attributes and is building their knowledge and skills to achieve relevant Performance Attributes. The agreed values are linked to examples of behaviours. Personal and performance attributes are included in position profiles and form the basis of staff performance evaluation and development processes. Although culture is a notoriously difficult concept to measure, it was anticipated that the mystery shopping survey would provide some evaluation of the extent of assimilation of agreed values, attributes and behaviours.

The Values articulated in the Ideal Culture, the integration of assessment activities, largely driven by the precepts of the Australian Business Excellence Framework and UWL's extensive and intensive human resource management and training practices are all, inter alia, directed towards an environment which is empowering for staff. Space does not permit a discussion of empowerment, a concept open to numerous interpretations. From studies such as those conducted with nurses (Spence et al 2005), it is probable that there is a strong link between structural empowerment and job satisfaction and organisational commitment. Findings from the Mystery Shopping survey generated reflection on UWL's empowerment model and its influence on staff attitudes and actions during service interactions.

Mystery Shopping Process

In his survey of mystery shopping, Calvert (2004) notes that if desired behaviours are being measured then "staff must be told before the mystery shopping commences". As behaviours relating to agreed values had been clearly articulated in the Ideal Culture and were regularly discussed during

performance evaluation and at meetings, staff were expected to have a good level of awareness of desired behaviours.

Prior to assessment, consultation with team coordinators took place to gather information on the aspects of service to be evaluated. An information session for all staff described the process and how the results were to be used. One staff member expressed concern about using a methodology which could be construed as spying. This concern was discussed and fears were allayed, as far as one could tell.

The mystery shopping process was conducted in 2004 over a period of three weeks. A range of services was evaluated across all delivery modes: face-to-face, email, telephone and web. Students from the School of Management and Marketing and one external student were selected and trained as Mystery Shoppers. Evaluation was based on the delivery of services using pre-established criteria identified by staff as important to measure as well as the shoppers' personal views of best practice in service. The mystery shopping survey at UWL, therefore, was designed to take the mystery out of what customers value in their service interactions. (Jantti, 2005). Some of the weaknesses identified by Calvert such as the limitation on knowledge of the shoppers were overcome to some extent by using the University's students who had some familiarity with the Library.

Over fifty scenarios for service interactions were written, based on the service and service attributes to be tested. Forty-three of the scenarios were actually used and some were repeated up to six times across day, evening and weekend opening hours.

Attributes and values to be tested included:

- Friendliness/approachability (Attribute: *Approachable*)
- Customer focus/attentiveness (Value: *People First*)
- Accuracy of information (Value: *Sharing knowledge and learning*)
- Knowledge and skills (Attribute: *Confident*)
- Appropriate referrals (Value: *Collaboration*)
- Problem solving/alternative solutions (Value: *Initiative*)

Others aspects tested:

- Signage
- Presentation of the building
- Ease of finding services
- Ease of identifying staff

Mystery shoppers were briefed on the intention of the survey and provided with a range of scenarios to be tested. Each scenario included a review form, which was completed by the Mystery Shopper after each interaction. Certain common factors, for example, first impressions of the Library, approachability of the staff member) were evaluated in all scenarios, whilst each scenario tested a specific service and service attributes.

At the conclusion of the three-week period, the Mystery Shoppers were asked to attend a focus group to provide feedback on the process and to provide an

opportunity for comments additional to the more formal information recorded on the review forms.

Results

All data from the scenario review sheets were recorded and analysed to identify common themes. Positive feedback was received for most of the targeted services and service attributes. Opportunities for improvement were identified also. Mostly these related to the knowledge, confidence and behaviours of staff. Process improvements did not emerge as a major issue. Examples of actions developed to address the performance gaps included refresher training sessions to improve, for example, knowledge of the full range of resources, both physically and on the web, as well as awareness of services, policies and processes. Issues relating to the standard of physical facilities were taken up with cleaning services. A bookmark, known as ACES (Approachable, Confident, Enthusiastic, Self Aware) was developed for staff emphasising the key personal attributes to be demonstrated in service interactions. This served as a quick reminder to have on hand at service points. In summary, findings revealed the importance placed on the human dimension: how staff acknowledge, respond and interact with customers, the knowledge, experience and skill demonstrated and the personalisation and customisation of services to meet the individual needs of a diverse range of customers and stakeholders.

Results were presented at an informal staff morning tea and the Mystery Shopping report was circulated to all teams. Staff were able to ask for the scenario results of any interaction in which they were mentioned. This was voluntary and confidentiality was assured. If they asked, the results were emailed to them together with an invitation to meet with the senior manager responsible for human resources management, who had also developed and managed the mystery shopping survey. A number of staff took up the invitation.

The report included the following recommendations:

- Repeat the survey in 2005 targeting the services and service attributes identified for improvement.
- Adopt some of the suggestions made by the Mystery Shoppers which included workshopping the questions with them to make the scenarios more applicable to their information needs, thus making the interaction more authentic, and employing students from a broader cross section of faculties.
- Investigate alternative approaches to surveying services and service attributes, including those suggested by Library staff. These included using cameras to record service interactions and exit surveys.

Has Mystery Shopping led to improved customer satisfaction?

Mystery shopping was conducted in May 2004 and the second iteration of the Rodski survey in October 2004. In the targeted categories UWL improved from 14th to 8th in the Library Staff category and from 11th to 7th in Service Delivery. A bonus was improvement in Communication from 6th to 3rd. It is not possible to demonstrate that this is a direct outcome of improvements resulting from the mystery shopping survey. The target of reaching the top five was not achieved, serving to maintain the impetus and motivation for further improvement. One

action in this regard will be a reiteration of Mystery Shopping, targeting the identified improvement areas, as recommended in the survey report.

Whether there has been an improvement in staff satisfaction, as measured by the Staff Perceptions Survey, awaits the scheduled repeat of this survey in October 2005 and whether improved staff satisfaction will subsequently translate into improved customer satisfaction also remains to be demonstrated. Consideration will be given to more closely aligning the timing and the content of the two surveys. Sharing experiences and learning within the Australian and New Zealand library sectors may be another source of improvement opportunities as interest is already evident on discussion lists.

Conclusion

Through its involvement with the Australian Business Excellence Framework and the associated Awards process, the University of Wollongong Library has accumulated extensive experience in measurement, organisational assessment, both internal and external, accreditation against standards and benchmarking of processes, services and organisational performance. A culture of assessment, as defined by Lakos (2001), is evident and has withstood the test of time through its longevity. UWL recently celebrated the tenth anniversary of its implementation of the ABEF. Notwithstanding, this author concludes that measurement of library performance, in particular customer satisfaction, remains an inexact science. Adding new instruments to the measurement toolkit, constantly reviewing the old instruments and drawing on the experience of other organisations are all critical in the search for meaningful indicators. Mystery shopping is an instrument extensively used in non-library sectors which has the potential to enrich librarians' understanding of what customers value and how satisfaction with services can be improved. UWL's experience with mystery shopping was essentially a positive one for both staff and leadership. Process improvement, additional training and a reinvigoration of values, behaviours and their effect on customer satisfaction all resulted from the mystery shopping initiative. The importance of empowerment, although not specifically included in the aspects to be tested, was clear and has led to a review of UWL's empowerment model and of staff understanding and acceptance of this concept. Articulation of the linkages between empowerment, the Ideal Culture and the integration of assessment practices will be the subject of future investigation.

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