How other customers influence customer satisfaction during the service delivery

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W.P. n° 2   Juin 2011

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INTRODUCTION

Any service experience may be analysed in terms of a system (Langeard*, et al.*, 1981). In its widest sense, servuction – the process of delivering a service - is the result of a system of interaction between the customer, the physical environment, the contact staff, the internal organisation system and the other customers present at the place of service (Eiglier and Langeard, 1987; Lovelock*, et al.*, 2008; Eiglier*, et al.*, 2010). The satisfaction of a service experience depends on these elements, the way they interconnect and their sequence in time (Eiglier and Langeard, 1987).

In order to improve customer satisfaction, service companies have put a great deal of emphasis on managing processes, the physical environment and employees. When it comes to studying the social interaction that occurs during the service encounter most research has focused on the interaction between employees and customer and little attention has been given to the role played by other customers during the service delivery and to their impact on customer satisfaction. Indeed, it is easier for the organization to control social interaction when one part of the interaction is under the hierarchical power of the company. However, in some service settings, social interactions that occur during the service delivery are mainly driven by interactions between customers and it is the responsibility of the organization to guarantee positive customer interactions.

The objective of this paper is to identify the influence of other customers on global satisfaction towards a service by 1) showing the importance of other customers' influence on customer satisfaction, 2) identifying other customer roles and 3) studying mechanisms by which other customers influence customer satisfaction. This exploratory research is based on a mix of four qualitative methods (critical incidents, ethnographic observation, journey pad and focus group) in the context of rail transportation.

CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

The necessary participation of the customer in service delivery supposes that, very often, he is physically present for the service experience and therefore exposed to social interactions with other customers. Indeed, few service companies have servuction systems where customers do not meet. Although the link between inter-customer social interactions and satisfaction is rarely dealt with in marketing literature, two current trends touch upon the subject.

The first is that of services marketing through the notion of participation and its consequences on the appreciation of the service in terms of satisfaction or loyalty. Interactions between customers are rarely dealt with, although they are implicit, but it is underlined that the stronger the customer participation the more positive the service appreciation. This link may be direct (Eiglier, *et al.*, 1979; Mills, *et al.*, 1983) or occur through the mediation of other concepts such as organisational socialisation (Kelley, *et al.*, 1990; Goudarzi and Eiglier, 2006) or the service script (Orsinger, 1997).

The second trend in research deals directly with the subject of social interaction between customers. It is very descriptive, and makes rarely the link with satisfaction. Research is essentially theoretical (Harris, *et al.*, 2000) or exploratory (McGrath and Otnes, 1995; Parker and Ward, 2000). Some research distinguishes itself by a quantitative approach (Martin, 1996; Capelli and Sabadie, 2006; Capelli and Sabadie, 2007; Wu, 2008). The interaction analysed in this research concerns both companions such as friends or family (Debenedetti, 2003) and strangers, and centres mainly on verbal interaction (Baron, *et al.*, 1996; Martin and Clark, 1996). Although this literature enables us strictly speaking to bring out neither the roles played by other customers in the level of satisfaction towards the service in an untroubled situation, nor the underlying mechanisms, it contributes nevertheless to the development of avenues to explore, and the consideration of other customers as:

- Generators of positives and negative interactions (Pranter and Martin, 1991) ;
- Social support (Adelman, *et al.*, 1987; Baron, *et al.*, 1996; Martin and Clark, 1996; Debenedetti, 2003; Capelli and Sabadie, 2006; Capelli and Sabadie, 2007) ;

- Suppliers of practical information about the service (Baron*, et al.*, 1996; Martin and Clark, 1996; Debenedetti, 2003; Capelli and Sabadie, 2006; Capelli and Sabadie, 2007) ;
- Helpers or people to be helped (McGrath and Otnes, 1995) ;
- Recreational support (Debenedetti, 2003).

METHODOLOGY AND FINDINGS

This exploratory research is based on a mix of four qualitative methods: critical incidents (117), ethnographic observation (15), journey pad (10) and focus group (2) in the context of rail transportation. The results of the research show the importance of other customers for global satisfaction, identify the roles of other customers who have an influence on satisfaction and enable a conceptualisation of the mechanisms by which other customers influence satisfaction.

The first important result mainly arises from the critical incidents method and demonstrates that relations between customers frequently contribute to satisfaction and/or dissatisfaction with the service delivered. Indeed, out of 117 incidents analysed, 95 respondents mentioned other customers spontaneously (absence of relations or relations) as a source of satisfaction (90 replies) or dissatisfaction (75 replies).

A thematic analysis of the contents carried out on the different literature allows us to propose a classification based on six main roles, divided into seventeen subgroups.

- Role 1: the other customer modifies expectations

The other customer changes the level of expectations by giving information, through his behaviour or verbally, about what will, or might happen during the journey. He may increase the level of expectation by giving "tips" about how to obtain the best possible service. He may also lower the level of expectation by giving information about what can go wrong with the service.

- Role 2: the other customer sets social rules

These include implicit rules for general behaviour and interaction in a public area and rules for behaviour specific to the service. The other customer personifies social rules. He is the model. Simply by his presence, attitude and appearance, he personifies standard behaviour. He implicitly incites the people who are with him to respect the same social rules. The other customer enforces the norm. He shows his disapproval or enforces the rules when they are not followed. The other customer shares the social norm, and creates complicity, a feeling of closeness or of pleasant agreement. By a sign, the other customer confirms tat they share the same rules: knowing looks, smiles exchanged at the expense of other customers or the company, connivance.

- Role 3: The other customer is a standard for comparison

The other customer allows you to judge your own experience by comparison, he becomes a point of reference. The other customer allows you to keep a sense of proportion. The other customer gives moral support. His mere presence reduces tension and establishes a feeling of solidarity. The other customer shows the unfairness of treatment by the service company.

- Role 4: The other customer entertains

The other customer is part of the décor. There is no explicit interaction, but the other customer is part of the general atmosphere. As part of the décor, he is a source of distraction. The other customer is a source of small talk. Unlike the preceding interaction, here the interaction is explicit. It is superficial, such as, for example, a short conversation on general subjects, the loan of a magazine, etc. The other customer is the source of an intense exchange. This interaction with the other is explicit, long and intense, such as, for example, carrying out an activity together leading to a situation of trust, the beginning of a genuine relationship.

- Role 5: The other customer disturbs

The other customer disturbs although he is aware of the rules, or is just bad mannered. The other customer does not respect your peace and quiet, your "private space". Directly and intrusively, the other customer speaks, touches or looks. More generally and indirectly, he is noisy or gives off a socially unacceptable smell. The other customer does not know how to participate, he is clumsy, inexperienced, he is a "fly in the ointment" for the smooth running

of the service. The other customer frightens, he is a threat, a potential danger, a source of mistrust.

- Role 6: The other customer helps participation

The other customer helps the tasks assigned by the servuction to be carried out well. He shows how things are to be done. He teaches, explains, informs, by his actions or what he says. The other customer does things for you. He helps through his actions. The other customer is a rescuer; he solves problems in unforeseen situations. He helps you to get by when there are no staff present. The other customer makes up for the absence or failures of the company, or deficiencies in the service.

Concerning the mechanisms of this influence, other customers affect satisfaction more or less directly, at several levels, and with reference to various models or trends in current literature (Figure 1). The paradigm of disconfirmation of expectations underlies this (Oliver, 1980; Oliver, 1993). Other customers influence satisfaction by modifying criteria and the threshold of expectation, both upwards and downwards (role 1). They play on the reference standard (Oliver, 1980) and on what the customer is liable to expect from the service. Similarly, other customers influence satisfaction by influencing the perceived service performance directly. By setting social rules within the group, by entertaining the customer and/or disturbing the smooth running of the process (roles 2, 4 and 5), other customers raise or lower the perceived level of performance and the quality of the service delivered. However, this model insufficient. The alternative, complementary trend: equity, or comparison with "the other" also comes into play (Oliver and Swan, 1989). Through what the other customer experiences during the service (he obtains less, he is more annoyed, he experiences the same thing, there are differences, things are unfair), he becomes the standard for comparison (role 3), a reference point for satisfaction or dissatisfaction. Finally the mediatory role of participation appears. By helping with participation (role 6), by demonstrating, explaining, doing things in your place, other customers enable you to be more efficient and perform better, and influence your performance within the process of service production. Hence, they have a direct influence on perceived service performance.
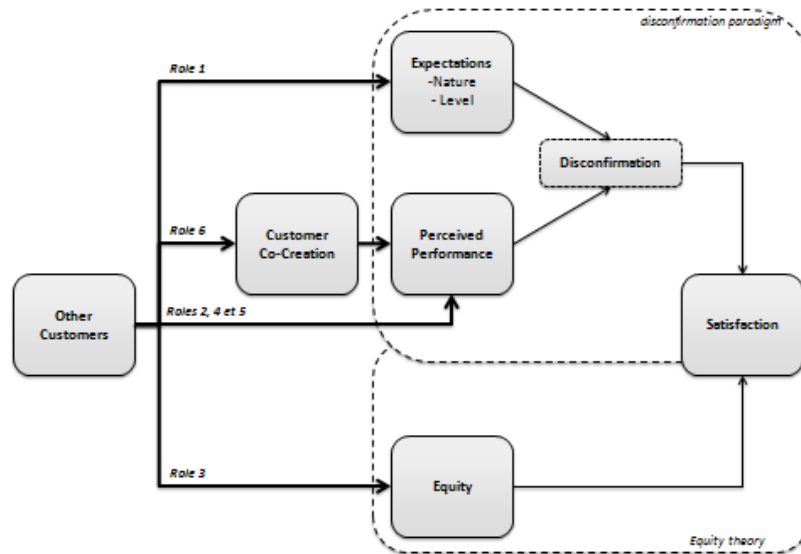
Figure 1. The mechanisms of the influence of other customers on satisfaction

IMPLICATIONS

The three main practical implications of the article are concerned with:

- Managing customer compatibility through a precise study of customer segmentation and then of action within the physical environment, towards contact staff or the service process,

- Socializing customers with respect to organization rules. The aim here is to define both the rules of participation and the implicit and explicit social rules for all customers by setting them out formally as a "good customer" guide.

- And finally empowering customers to manage other customers and the service atmosphere. The company could for example propose to expert customers who wish it, to obtain loyalty points in exchange for intervening with other customers during the experience to assist them, direct them, inform them about the service offer, encourage positive interactions and limit negative ones. Moreover, the service company can create an environment where the customers are encouraged to help each other.

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