STUDENTS LEARN CUSTOMER SERVICE AND SELLING WHILE CONDUCTING RESEARCH

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ABSTRACT

Sixty-two students participated in a class research project focusing on customer service and selling. Posing as customers in retail stores, students observed customer service and selling techniques while altering their personal appearances. Similarities and differences in customer service and selling were explored with respect to type of retail store and type of customer appearance.

INTRODUCTION

There is an ongoing challenge for educators to engage students in learning to the extent that students become motivated to seek new information and involve themselves in problem-solving activities to achieve new knowledge. Recent literature has encouraged the use of active research (Kuhne and Quigley, 1997), active learning (Stalheim-Smith, 1998), and problem-based learning (Wilkerson and Gijselaers, 1996) to empower students in their educational endeavors. While it is challenging to structure them, students clearly benefit from opportunities to engage in learning endeavors which require active research, problem solving skills, and real-world applications. To these ends, this student research project was developed and implemented.

A retail merchandising course focused on professional development included among its course objectives that students *analyze characteristics of the retail environment including the competitive market environment, consumer behavior, customer service, and selling*. The goal of this project was to teach customer service and selling strategies in the context of a research-based project. The class was large (62 students), yet a hands-on activity was desired for students to appreciate the customer service and selling atmosphere of retail environments. It was desirable to create an experiential learning exercise which would be challenging and educationally sound for individual students and would also create an atmosphere of cooperative learning. Kuhne and Quigley's (1997) six-step model of action research, which includes (a) problem identification, (b) project identification, (c) measurement development, (d) project implementation, (e) evaluation, and (f) transition, was used as a template for the research project.

PROJECT OVERVIEW

Students in a sophomore-level professional development course participated in the research project. The project was presented to students early in the quarter, so that they would have ample time to engage in planning, implementation, and reflection. The nature of research was discussed during several class periods as the project developed. The project was approved by the university's Human Subjects Review Committee, and students were asked to sign a consent form so that information generated could be disseminated beyond the university. Students were informed that the project was a required element of the course; however, if one declined consent to participate in the study, the specific information generated by that student would not be included in future published research.

For the Customer Service and Selling project, four tasks were identified as project components, and were required of each student. These were:
1. Identify a retail store to use in the research project.
2. Visit that retailer three different times, on the same day of the week and at approximately the same time.
3. Observe the customer service and selling techniques of the selected

retailer, completing an evaluation survey after each visit.

4. Complete an essay describing experiences as a customer, particularly with respect to the customer service and selling techniques observed.

Problem Identification

Cooperatively, the class members spent one class period identifying various customer services typically offered by retailers. The professor facilitated the discussion and compiled notes on the chalk board. Students drew from their experiences as customers, store employees, and students of retailing to identify the following customer services: store hours, types of transactions, special sales and promotions, layaway, return and adjustment policies, gift wrap, and dressing rooms. This discussion and identification of components of customer service provided a context for the types of activities the students would consider when completing store evaluations.

The role of the sales associate was then discussed. It was universally agreed that the sales associate is primarily responsible for assisting customers as they shop and is a key link between the company and its customers. Students in the class disagreed about the amount of interaction that is preferable between sales associates and customers. This discussion supported the notion that shopping preference with respect to level of sales assistance varies among customers. Students did agree that sales associates should respect all customers and treat them equitably and according to store policy.

In a similar exercise, and under the direction of the professor, the class collectively listed a variety of types of retailers so that a class discussion focusing on different expectations of customer service levels at different types of retailers could take place. Retailer types identified by students included department stores, discount stores, grocery stores, mass merchandisers, off-price retailers, specialty stores, and variety stores (such as drug stores). Information generated by previous researchers with respect to the relationship between customer expectations and satisfaction with service quality was presented and discussed (Parasuaman, Zeithaml, & Berry, 1988). A discussion with respect to the relationship between expectations and satisfaction ensued. The role of store type in customer expectations was also presented and discussed (Paulins & Geistfeld, 1998). These discussions established the justification and rationale for the research project.

Project Identification

The specific nature of the student project needed to be identified. The students were asked to respond to the question "Are all customers treated equally in all retail stores?" A lively discussion ensued, with the consensus that customers might be treated differently in various situations. The concept of customer categorization was presented to the class, and a discussion occurred regarding the likelihood that customers are treated differently based on personal characteristics and appearances. Students generated a list of personal characteristics which could have an effect on the personal service offered to an individual. The characteristics identified by students in the class were age, race, dress and appearance, body adornment (such as piercing and tattoos), and personal familiarity with the store (do the sales associates know you).

The class members, under the direction of the facilitating professor, identified dress and appearance as the independent variable that would be used for the research project. The category "dress and appearance" was selected because it could be easily modified for multiple visits to the selected retail store whereas the other personal characteristics could not.

After determining that the three store visits would be differentiated by each student's "dress and appearance," the class embraced the task of defining various categories of "dress and

appearance." Following a homework assignment requiring students to "think of different dress and appearance styles which we could use for the project and which each student could adapt for his/her store visits," the professor took notes on the chalkboard as students shared their ideas. Six different categories were initially presented by the class. These were coined "collegiate," "dress-up," "scummy," "work-out," "hippy," and "eccentric." Once the category identifiers were presented, class members contributed definitions of the dress/appearance styles.

To fit into the scope of the project, the class determined by consensus and vote to adopt the categories "collegiate," "dress-up," and "scummy" for the independent variables. Students all agreed that these styles were distinctly different, and were possible based on existing wardrobes at the students' disposal. (Table 1)

Table 1: Dress Styles Selected for the Study

Collegiate
- neat, clean, well-groomed
- khakis, college t-shirts
- possibly baseball cap
- tennis shoes or other casual shoe
- possibly carrying a backpack

Dressed-Up (professional)
- neat, clean, well-groomed, more formal than collegiate
- skirt and top or dress for females, suit or dress pants (possibly tie) for males
- loafers, oxfords, pumps, or other dress shoes
- no denim, no tennis shoes

Scummy
- unkempt
- no shower
- no make-up (females), no shave (males)
- possibly holes in clothing
- dirty clothing
- wrinkled clothing

At this point, the students were instructed that for this project they each needed to identify a store to visit, posing as a customer, three times during the course of the term. Students were cautioned to select stores to which they could travel with ease, as they would need to be there three separate visits. Additionally, students were required to select stores where they would be anonymous customers. Because a large percentage of students were employees or regular, recognized customers of retail stores, a valuable discussion ensued with respect to the integrity of the study and the importance of customer anonymity.

Measurement Development

After selecting the retail store for the study, students completed an adapted SURVQUAL instrument to measure their expectations of customer services. On this survey, the students identified their chosen stores by name. In a later class period, each of the stores selected was presented and the class collectively identified the store type associated with each of the stores. The process of categorizing individual stores into store types reinforced the definitions of store types which had been discussed in class, and also created an awareness of the potential confusion of some stores in categorization. The concept of validity was discussed, and students were encouraged to consider the implications of reporting store type differences without a clear understanding of and definition of store type. This illustration of the concept of validity was useful to the instruction of research methods and to the integrity of the study, as clear definitions of various store types were made. Class-generated definitions of the store types included in this study are presented in Table 2.

A survey, based on the SERVQUAL instrument (Parasuaman, Zeithaml, and Berry, 1988), was developed and distributed in triplicate to students. The students were asked to complete this survey after each of their three store visits. The questions on this survey were formulated to pair

with the questions posed on the first "expectations" survey which was completed in class. This particular survey focused on the actual service received during the store visits.

Table 2: Store Type Categorizations

Department
- multiple product lines
- multiple target markets
- full price merchandise or periodic sales

Discount
- below-average prices
- focus on low price

Grocery
- primarily food products

Specialty
- one product category
- limited target market
- full price or periodic sales

Variety/Drug
- miscellaneous product lines
- small store atomsphere
- broad target market

Project Implementation

Each student was instructed to develop a "shopping scenario" for the project. The scenario needed to reflect a customer activity with some shopping premise. Students were encouraged to be creative with their shopping plans, and to consistently have the same shopping scenario for each of the three visits. The one stipulation made to students in addition to the dress code was that some form of assistance from a store employee must be sought. For instance, a student "shopping" at a grocery store might have planned to visit the deli and inquire about the freshness, quality, and price of chicken salad. A student visiting a variety store might have planned to ask an employee where anniversary cards could be found.

Students self-selected their clothing items and controlled their own appearances, based on the guidelines developed in the class. Examples of typical student descriptions of *collegiate* appearance were "a pair of khakis and a university sweatshirt," and "jeans, a sorority sweatshirt, and my hair in a simple pony-tail." One student described her *dressed-up (professional)* appearance as "a black skirt, dressy shirt and jacket, and heels," and another "a professional pant suit." The *scummy* appearance category was typically reported in terms of "dirty looking jeans, an oversized sweatshirt, hair in a lazy pony-tail, and no makeup." Additional descriptions for the *scummy* category included "sweatpants, dirty tennis shoes, and somewhat greasy hair."

Evaluation

Time was reserved in several class periods to discuss the potential dilemma of "preconceived notions." Students were repeatedly cautioned to be as objective as possible when evaluating the customer service they received. Furthermore, students were instructed not to carry the survey forms into the stores, and to complete the surveys immediately upon leaving the stores. Potential limitations of the study results were discussed in light of possible student biases, preconceived notions, and self-fulfilling prophecies.

Students had a nine week period to complete the project. At the completion of the project each of 62 students had selected a store, completed an expectations survey for that store, visited the store three times in three different dress styles, and completed a customer service performance survey for each store visit. Comparisons in customer service expectations and performance could be observed by both store type and dress type. Students reflected on both their experiences as customers in various dress styles with respect to customer service and selling strategies offered.

After participating in the project, each student submitted a report describing the details of his or her experiences as a customer during the three store visits. In some of the reports students described a consistent difference in customer service associated with differences in appearance while others noted that no substantial differences were observed. This was useful to support the notion that differences can not necessarily be assumed. The role of store type in the level of customer services offered was discussed at the conclusion of the class project. Students' observations support the probability that store type does affect customer service and sales techniques.

Reflection

Students individually reported the observations they made during the course of the project, and the class engaged in discussions which allowed the students to share perspectives of their peers' experiences. These reports offered insight into the learning experiences of each student. One student reflected:

"Through this project I realized the impact that minor variations in dress can make. The attitude of the sales people, the shopping experience, and the initiative to buy can all be altered by this one entity. I saw first hand how the attitude of sales people change just by a first impression of 'what you see is what you get.' I found it somewhat humorous when I visited in my collegiate wear accompanied by a friend in an OU sweatshirt and I received more help and more friendly service. This project is just an example of how sales people need to be aware of the actions and their openness to help everyone. In a perfect setting every customer would get the same amount of service, but realistically that can never happen so for retailers to be one step ahead the key is equal, personal and knowledgeable assistance."

Another student commented:

"I did ... come to a realization. During training you are taught to give everyone the same level of customer service no matter what they look like. During this project I did realize that in most cases everyone does receive customer service, but the level of service does vary. No matter how much training sales associates go through most do prejudge customers who come through the door of their store."

The student continued,

"Everyone wants the customers who appear to be free with their money. If someone comes into the store that doesn't appear to have money no one really rushes over to give them assistance, the take their time. After participating in this project I realized that I too have been guilty of prejudging people. When I return to retail over winter break it is a problem I plan on paying attention to."

RESULTS

Student reflection reports provided evidence that the course objective, *to analyze characteristics of the retail environment including the competitive market environment, consumer behavior, customer service, and selling*, was met. This project was an effective way to incorporate a learning module on the retail environment, specifically customer service and selling, into the professional development course. Furthermore, as educators are increasingly challenged with larger student: faculty ratios while facing expectations for research agenda, projects of this nature provide workload efficiencies. Not only were students challenged to engage in active learning and research, but also the results of the research project are a valuable contribution to the customer service literature. Complete analysis of data generated through this project will provide insight into the following research questions:

1. Does customer dress affect the quality of customer service received?
2. Does store type affect customers' expectations of customer service?
3. Does store type affect the quality of customer service at retail stores?

4. Is there an interaction between store type and dress on the effect of customer service quality?

As an additional learning opportunity, students experienced a research project from the point of design development to results analysis. Care was taken to give autonomy to the students as they developed the research agenda for the customer service and selling project. While the professor identified goals and objectives for the project, a component of the learning process included student input and decision making. Guidance was offered, but the project variables were determined by the students, which likely contributed to a feeling of "ownership" of the project among students. Overall, students reacted favorably to the assignment and indicated that they have a greater appreciation for the retail customer service and selling environment as well as a better understanding of the skills they must develop to be successful in that environment.

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