

Using employee insights in fine-tuning the customer experience

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Abstract

For companies it is important to create positive customer experiences. This paper suggests one customer-sensitive way to get information to improve the customer experience. This is done by conducting non-managerial employee walkthrough audits with those employees who take care of the service processes and the facilities in daily manner. The assumption is that those employees have first-hand understanding of the customers and their experiences. The method is tested by conducting walk-through audits in in two Finnish wellness centers. The staff members were interviewed while they were walking around in the service provider's premises. Additionally in the other site there was a managerial workshop to gain the management view on the customer experience. The walk-through audits gave several suggestions for actions to improve the customer experience and they were seen as a powerful way to understand the customer experience. On the other hand it was acknowledged that the employee understanding of the customer is limited and there are spaces and processes in the wellness centers where the employees rarely go. Thus relying solely on employee understanding in fine-tuning the customer experience would be limited and would not cover all aspects of the customer experience.

KEYWORDS: customer experience, service processes, spatial processes

1 Introduction

Managing the customer experiences has been quite a central topic in business research lately (see, for example Mascarenhas, & al. 2006; LaSalle & Britton 2003; Pine & Gilmore 1999). The focus has been on moving from products, services and processes towards the customers and their experiences.

For some businesses the customer experience is their core business. Their customers use their products and services in order to gain experiences. Hotels, amusement parks, concert halls and vacation destinations are examples of such businesses (see, for example, Heath & Wall 1992; Rasila, 2010). We can say that these businesses are in the business of marketing experiences.

This research is interested in one such service where creating favourable customer experiences are the core business. This business is offering wellness services for individuals and companies. Such wellness services include, among others, day-spa services, spa activities and exercising. In the context of this study these services are provided by wellness centres where most customers stay overnight.

The customers are important sources of information when creating improved customer experiences. This approach is not entirely unproblematic. It is quite easy to get the customer involved through feedback systems, polls, surveys or short interviews. The information gained through these “resource-efficient” methods is always somewhat limited and it does not necessarily offer in-depth understanding of the customer experience. On the other hand involving larger number of customers to processes that consume more time and other resources is not either a good option.

One alternative is to work with those individuals who interact with the customers in their daily activities. Assumedly working with the customers gives the employees some understanding of the potential to enhance the customer experience. This paper studies if it possible to gain understanding for improving the customer experience through the employees. Further, the aim is to understand what kind of information may be retrieved from the employees.

The ability to use employees as a source to develop customer experiences is tested in case study setting. The cases included two Finnish wellness centres. Both are in the business of creating experiences for their customers and the information was gathered with walkthrough audit and future oriented workshop.

The user journey approach is used to structure the findings. User journey and related mapping methods are much used ways of illustrating the customer experience. The paper starts with an introduction to the user journey. Then the methodologies and case study setting are introduced. After this the results of the empirical part of this paper are presented. The concluding section suggests some ways for further research and looks critically at the findings of this study.

2 Theoretical background

The service in many lines of business is carried out in the premises of the service provider. In this case the space and the service processes are closely interrelated. Walk-through audits have been used to understanding the customer experience that is linked to both the space and the service processes (see Fitzsimmons and Fitzsimmons 1994; Fitzsimmons and Maurer 1991). These audits may be referred to as Service Process Audits (SPA) as suggested by Rasila & al. (2010)

A basic method to understand and describe service processes is service blueprinting. The method was created by Shostack already in 1984. In the service blueprint, the service processes and interactions are visualized as a flowchart (see for example Koljonen and Reid 2000). This approach has some disadvantages; first, it typically looks at the processes from the company rather than a customer perspective. Second, the blueprint illustrates only the observable actions or events (Kingman-Brundage 1989).

Other methods for analysing service processes are service mapping (Kingman-Brundage 1991; Gummesson 1993; Gummesson and Kingman-Brundage 1992) and the sequential incident technique (SIT) (Stauss 1993; Stauss and Weinlich 1995). The first is, as service blueprinting, more company focused, whereas SIT is more customer focused (Johnston 1999).

The sequential incident technique draws from the critical incident technique (CIT) in which the customer is asked to describe those moments in the service process that were in some respect exceptional – either in good or in bad. The data is then classified into different types of experiences with content analysis. (Bitner and al. 1990) For our purposes the approach has two limitations; first the process dimension is not clear, and second, the normal incidents are excluded from the analysis.

The sequential incident technique bypasses these problems and thus it is used as the framework for this study. The technique looks at entire processes and includes also those incidents that are not exceptional. As Stauss and Weinlich (1997) state: “The fundamental purpose of the method is to record all incidents customers perceive in a specific service transaction sequentially in the course of the consumption process.”

The first step is to construct a “customer path diagram” (compare with blueprinting). This diagram shows the typical path a customer follows when he is involved in some service process. Suggested methods for data gathering are single interviews, group interviews, surveys and observation. The aim is to understand what customers typically do during the service process. (Stauss and Weinlich 1995) In the context of this study we can speak of “customer journey” or “user journey”. (Alho and al. 2008).

When the customer path or user journey is understood, SIT moves on to the second phase – namely assessing the customer experience during this path. This is done with interviews or surveys. After all the data have been collected, they may then be analysed. If a survey is conducted, then statistical methods are applicable. If the customer experience is studied by interviews, more qualitative methods are applicable. (Stauss and Weinlich 1995)

3 Case study setting and methodology

A typical wellness center is a complex of accommodation facilities, exercise and therapy facilities, swimming pools, and restaurants. There are some 20 such institutions in Finland and these may be found from all over the country. In addition to self-paying individual customers and company visitors having meetings in the wellness centers there are also at least some degree of rehabilitation services available. The two cases in this paper are big actors in this business and the companies are more oriented to self-paying customers than doing publicly funded rehabilitation.

In both companies a walkthrough audit was carried out with representatives from different professions. There were participants from the restaurant, the reception, the accommodations, wellness services and rehabilitation. It was asked that the

managerial representatives were not present in the audit so that the employees could speak in a free and relaxed atmosphere.

The group consisting of the occupational groups mentioned above was interviewed while they were walking around in the premises. The route was selected by the participants and the advice was to bring the researcher to places the personnel wanted to show them. The interview was recorded and photographs were taken during the trip.

On the second wellness center there was also a participatory workshop to discuss the future of the company and its premises. Also this workshop was recorded. The participants were middle managers in contrast to the non-managerial representatives of the walk-through audits.

This paper draws from the techniques presented in previous section and tests if these could be applied to understand the customer experience through the eyes of the employees that take care of the service process and the premises. In the next section the findings are presented in a customer journey steps.

4 Findings

The customer journey or customer diagram path was divided into seven steps. These were:

1. **Orientation.** What the customer does and thinks before leaving for the wellness center. This includes deciding to go, choosing among service provider, finding ways to go to the wellness center etc.
2. **Arrival.** The arrival to the wellness center either by foot, bike, car or public transportation. This phase ends when the customer leaves the reception to go to activities or to accommodation facilities.
3. **Moving around.** Going from place to place to carry out different activities in the premises.
4. **Accommodation.** Going into the hotel room and using it.
5. **Wellness processes.** These processes involve typically group or individual contact with the wellness center professionals. These services include, among

others, massage, make up, gym, outdoor activities, lectures and group sports (such as aerobics or playing football).

6. **Eating.** The places to eat include restaurants (both buffet and ala carte), cafes and bars.
7. **Exit.** This includes leaving the premises and getting back home. Also the marketing activities after leaving the premises are part of exit.

First step was the *orientation* and the employees noted that the customer experience begins before the first visit to the wellness center. Thus more attention should be paid on the orientation phase of the customer journey. Especially the internet and social media could be used much better.

One role of the internet is on marketing the services. Another role of the internet is linked to the preparations done before the arrival at the wellness center. Thus information such as “how to get there” and “what things I need to take with me” is important first steps in the formation of the customer experience. Additionally people want to know in advance what services they may purchase from the wellness center and what happenings will take place during their visit. Thus the internet plays an important role in formation of expectations before the actual visit.

The *arrival* phase gives the first impression about the physical premises of the company. The reception areas of wellness centers are much like those of hotels. There is a reception desk and typically a cafeteria nearby. The employees saw that the lobby should give a personal, dynamic and relaxed impression of the entire wellness center. In this respect the interviewees saw that their companies had done well – both companies had invested heavily on creating good first impression in the reception area.

One thing that was lacking was that the services and happenings were not visible in the reception areas. One suggestion was that there should be virtual boards which would allow you to scan through the available treatments and activities. The customers get the hotel like impression, but element of taking care of yourself was not visible in the lobby – even though this care is the main reason to come to the wellness center.

Moving around in the premises is a great challenge in creating the total customer experience. The wellness centers are huge complexes and visitors have sometimes difficulties in learning to move around in the premises. This is sometimes really irritating, and the customers complain the employees about their problem of finding their way. This may affect the total customer experience negatively. Thus, it could be productive to give

more importance to guiding visitors around. This could be done for example by adding more visible signage.

Further, the interviewees told that sometimes the customers feel awkward when they are moving around in the premises in their bathing ropes or t-shirts and shorts while they have to by-pass the group of company visitors in black suits. Thus figuring out a way to direct the movement of different customer groups should be considered so that individuals in different context do not meet in an awkward way.

The first move in the premises is either to participate in a wellness process, business meetings or *accommodation*. The hotel rooms of the wellness centers are just like any other hotel rooms and they are supposed to be a comfortable experience for the customers. Customers seldom have negative feedback to give about the accommodation. Apart from cleaning department and facilities management, the personnel of wellness centers quite rarely go to the customers' rooms so their understanding of this side of the experience was perceived to be limited.

Some customers buy *wellness processes* in advance before coming to the rehabilitation center. Then there are additional services that may be purchased on site. Typically using the pool area and the saunas is free for those staying overnight. For creating customer experiences it is important to create wellness areas that have the same atmosphere that the services in question. For example, the day spa areas need to be relaxing and restorative whereas the sport facilities should be dynamic in nature.

During the visit to the wellness center the wellness services are those moments that the customers and employees are interacting most and for longer time periods. Thus in this setting the space, service process and the personality of the employee giving the treatment is affecting the customer experience especially lot.

More attention should be paid to educate those persons who interact with the customer lot during their service delivery processes. For example hairdresser can be a great source of information to customers but many times they are outsourced service providers who have little information about the other activities in the wellness center. They have the possibility to enhance the customer experience, but no means to do that.

Both case wellness centers had paid a lot of attention to the *restaurants and cafes* so that they would maximize the customer experience. There were special attention paid to the interior design and also the quality of food. In addition to the waitresses the other employees in the wellness centers had little to do with the customers while they were

eating. The customer feedback they had heard during their own duties was positive in nature.

Again in the restaurant the different customer groups at the same tables were understood as a problem affecting customer experience negatively. Thus the business man in black suit and his client eating in a sweat suit on his way to jogging were both feeling uncomfortable. The employees commented that sometimes the customers did not know the dress code to the restaurant and they might have just casual outfits with them – thus they were not able to change for the dinner or the lunch while other visitors had their best evening clothes with them.

After the time in the wellness center there is the time to *exit* the premises. From employee perspective this was quite a neutral procedure and quite familiar as it resembled so much ordinary hotel visit. For the customer experience leaving tends to be less distressing than arriving as the problems of *how I get there* and *where can I park my car* are not present. Still, the exit is a phase of the customer journey where there is a great potential to affect the customer experience positively as the customers are not used to expect that.

In both wellness centers there is a café in the vicinity of the reception desk. Thus it is possible to make the exit more enjoyable by sitting for a cup of coffee before leaving the premises. This was perceived to be a good solution. The employees wondered how they could affect the customers after their departure so that they might return to the same wellness center again.

5 Conclusions and discussion

The employees doing work at service provider's premises are one great source for information about how to improve the customer experience. They interact with the customers in daily basis and it is possible to get customer information from them without bothering the customers.

The understanding of employees is efficient as it has cumulated from experiences from many customers. Thus in a way one experienced employee may speak for big group of customers whereas individual customer may speak for himself only. Further, the employees have a longer perspective on issues than the customers who spent shorter periods in the premises.

Still, there are parts of the customer journey where the employees are not present in any way. Thus getting customer information from employees in this setting is

difficult or impossible. Thus the customer information from the employees is not enough without additional understanding from the customers themselves.

In the two case wellness centers walkthrough audits with different employee groups were carried out. The biggest room for improvement appeared to be in the phase when the customer has not yet entered the premises. In this phase it is possible to affect the expectations of the customers and offer him new experiences even before entering the premises. Keeping up with the customer relationship after the visit is a challenge that would probably affect the customer experience positively.

The difference of wellness center and a hotel is in the wellness services available. To enhance the customer experience the services and happenings available for the customer should be made much more visible not only before the visit but also during it. The reception area, the hotel rooms and corridors and elevators could be used much more effectively to pursue the wellness aspect of the companies. This would enhance the customer experience and bring new business for the wellness service sector of the wellness centers.

Another central need for change is to think about the roles of customers in different roles. Customer having a business meeting and a customer having an aerobics lesson have totally different roles. When these roles meet, there is confusion that could be avoided by rethinking the processes and spatial arrangements in a way that people in different roles do not meet in an awkward manner. The summary of suggestions for improvement is presented in *Table 1*.

Table 1: Some suggestions for improving the customer experience.

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|---------------|---|
| Orientation | Using social media and internet in the marketing more effectively; informing the customer about things such as “how to get there?”, “what services I might use during my stay?”, “what I need to take with me?” |
| Arrival | Marketing the services in the reception. |
| Moving around | Better signage or other ways to navigate in the premises, different paths for different customer groups. |

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| Accommodation | No suggestions as the participants were not with the customer in the accommodation facilities. |
| Wellness processes | Different activities need different “moods” in spatial solutions; personnel providing wellness services is an important channel for marketing the services and the wellness center if educated to do so. |
| Eating | Clear dress codes; balancing the dining of different customer groups. |
| Exit | Good mood in exit – for example a moment in the cafeteria; better marketing activities after departure |

This study has been limited to two cases and the findings are more practical than theoretical. This is a severe limitation of this study. Still, this paper works as an initial open for more academic discussion on the topic. Next step in the process will be to map the customer experience from the customer perspective and see how well the customer experience and employee understanding of it will fit.

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