

Building A University Student Customer Base: Is It A Negelected Issue?

K.A. MPAATA

NKUMBA UNIVERSITY

Abstract

This article evaluates the importance of building a university customer base and provides some empirical evidence to show that it is a neglected issue that demands for urgent attention by the different employees in universities. It calls for a focused customer care and quality service delivery by demonstrating quality teaching, tolerance, warmth and strong interpersonal skills among others in leading universities like Makerere and Nkumba.

Introduction

Whilst all managers have some responsibility for maintaining and developing the organisation's client base, all indications seem to suggest that not enough has been done in case of university managers. For example, complaints by students about failure to be attended to in leading institutions like Makerere, Nkumba and Mukono continue in our daily newspapers. This neglect, if not taken seriously, is most likely to compromise quality. Thus, The Daily Monitor of June, 23, 2005 ran an Editorial in which it was observed that *"in the confusion some people in Makerere graduated even though they failed some papers, and some who passed missed graduation because their marks are missing."*

Additionally, Nsibambi, the Chancellor, on April 1, 2005 observed that Makerere's numbers had overwhelmed its capacity to deliver quality education. Moreover, Tibenderana (2005) had noted that University examinations, be they in public or private are susceptible to exam malpractice, and called for a watchful eye of the National Council for Higher Education to ensure that some universities do not award bogus degrees. To reveal that there is a strong erosion of customer care, Ofwono in his letter of June 2, 2007 to The New Vision editor, castigated these

The specific objective of the study was an attempt to empirically document the student perception of quality in the services provided by both Makerere and Nkumba Universities and how it has influenced their satisfaction. *The hypothesis tested was: Customer care and service delivery in Makerere and Nkumba universities significantly influence students satisfaction.*

A customer base for university in this study can be addressed through a focus on the following issues:

1. Student complaints

To express dissatisfaction is not a crime. When a student expresses dissatisfaction, it does not follow that there is anything technically wrong with what the university is offering. There is, however, something wrong with the customer's usage or perception of the service offering in use. It is, therefore, crucial to identify the "genuine" complaints where there is a fault in the offering so that urgent action can be taken. Routine complaints should be used to guide management in improvements to the way in which the offering is packaged, promoted, served and so on.

2. Relationship Marketing

A relationship - marketing oriented organization brings together customer service, quality and marketing (Prokesch, 1995, Mckenna, 1991). Universities are most likely to be in need of this to realize quality.

3. noe

Figure. 1 Maximizing University Efficiency and Effectiveness



In order to achieve a sustainable competitive advantage, universities may need to deliver value via service quality, reliability and responsibility among others. Concern with customer service as a competitive thrust has now received much attention in the academic environment (Buzzell & Gale, 1987) and in the popular press (Phillips, Dunkin, & Treece, 1990). Companies such as American Airlines, and 3M have had an enduring reputation for Superior Customer service that has earned them higher returns than competitors (Phillips et al; 1990). These companies have built unique competencies for producing and delivering quality products and services that effectively meet customer tastes and preferences relative to competitors. Thus, they earn above normal profits in the short run and an image for reliability and dependability in dealing with customers and other clients that promote long term prosperity. No serious university in Uganda and beyond can afford to neglect this observation.

It is also noted here that reputation building takes time to cultivate and it is achieved through specification of consistent product quality and customer service requirements. Universities in Uganda need to provide unconditional service guarantees, and empowerment of employees to solve customer problems as they arise. Reputation building must be a priority of top management if the university is to earn a sustainable competitive advantage.

Top management contributes to the ongoing delivery of value by specifying standards of performance, communicating these clearly and unambiguously to employees, establishing appropriate hiring, training, motivating, and reward systems for developing core skills, and boosting employee morale (Irvin & Micheal, 1989, Mpaata, 2005).

The contention that strategy and performance are ultimately a reflection of top management or the domain coalition (Chan and McDermott, 1996) underscores the importance of managerial competence as a source of sustainable competitive advantage. University managers are responsible for developing an overall sense of purpose and direction that guides integrated strategy formulation and implementation. Thus, managerial competences may be viewed as influencing the interaction among resource based, transformation based, and output based components of a university system.

What is the Use of Customer Identification?

Identification of the customer is crucial to any business organization. Therefore, universities must define their customers in order to identify their needs, wants and expectations so as to plan and design systems to effectively deliver them. In support of this, Wiersema (1996), in his study at C.W.I (cable & wireless company) 1993, found that only segmentation and complete customer responsiveness triumphs in the telecommunication industry. He noted that identifying customers and their needs helped the company to survive the highly competitive telecommunication industry. They employed a strategy to **find the right customers, learn what they want, sell it to them and service them in all their needs**. After this, their noteworthy results of revenue leapt from \$365m in 1991 to \$672m in 1995.

In another study at Nike, a sports show company, Kotler (2007), reveals that Nike's consistent delivering of real value to customer and caring much about its customer paid off handsomely. In 1998 alone, total revenue increased by 36%. This also made Nike dominate the worlds athletic footwear market. It captured an eye - popping 43% of the U.S. market - twice that of the nearest competitor Reebok and a 27% share internationally. These examples therefore show that market position is a result of understanding customer needs.

Quantitative Study Measures

Empirical data for the present study was obtained using self report questionnaires that had a total of ten items. The sample comprised MBA Weekend students of Nkumba University and Masters of Ethics and Public Management Evening students of Makerere University. All the respondents were in their final year in 2006. A total of 104 questionnaires were filled using collective administration. Before lectures could be conducted, the researcher treated the students as a captive audience.

The items in the questionnaire measured the service process construct with items such as: composure of university staff especially in the Registry and other areas that students visit frequently; quality of teaching; tolerance of University staff officials; warmth towards students; interpersonal skills; hostility of staff; sensitivity of staff; staff concentration; rudeness/abusive anger; and the general conduct of exams.

All these items were rated on a five point likert scale from "they are at all times available" to "Never" in existence.

Data Analysis

In order to determine the type and nature of student perception of quality rating in these universities and how they are satisfied with service delivery, descriptive statistics, and regression analysis were employed in the analysis. The results are indicated in the summary tables below:

Composure of Staff	Frequency	Valid Percentage
Never	53	54.6
Rarely	24	24.7
Sometimes	13	13.4
At most times	7	7.2
At all times	0	0.0
Total	97	100%

The table indicates that there is little reported composure of staff in these universities. The Registry was specifically targeted because of it frequently handles students more than any other especially during examination time.

Quality of Teaching	Frequency	Valid Percentage
Never good	3	2.9
Rarely good	7	6.7
Sometimes good	17	16.3
Good at most times	67	64.4
Good at all times	10	9.6
Total	97	100%

The table indicates that the quality of teaching in these two universities in Good most of the time. 79% of the respondents approved of the good teaching in these two universities.

Tolerance and Care	Frequency	Valid Percentage
Never tolerance	26	25.5
Rarely tolerance	64	62.7
Sometimes tolerance	6	5.9
Tolerant at most times	3	2.9
Tolerant at all times	3	2.9
Total	102	100%

The table shows that most respondents were of the view that those serving them were rarely or never tolerant. A total of 88% of the respondents were in this category. Perhaps most students interpreted tolerance in terms of delay in fees payment and class attendance which to these universities cannot tolerate.

Table 4 Warmth towards Students

Warmth of Staff	Frequency	Valid Percentage
Never	5	4.9
Rarely	80	78.4
Sometimes	6	5.9
At most times	9	8.8
At all times	2	2.0
Total	102	100%

The table indicates that just like tolerance, warmth towards students is very rare in these two universities.

Table 5 Interpersonal Skill Application

Interpersonal Skills	Frequency	Valid Percentage
Excellent	2	1.9
Good	4	3.8
Fairly good	48	46.2
Poor	40	38.5
Very Poor	10	9.6
Total	104	100%

This table indicates that 50% of the respondents feel that the interpersonal skill application by those serving them is poor while almost the same number of 54% take it to be fairly good.

Table 6 Hostility of University Staff

Hostility	Frequency	Valid Percentage
Never hostile	3	2.9

Rarely hostile	1	1.0
Sometimes hostile	82	78.8
At most times hostile	6	5.8
Hostile at all time	12	11.5
Total	104	100%

The results here reveal that most of the respondents believed that sometimes there is hostility among staff members in both Makerere and Nkumba universities.

Table 7 Sensitivity of University Staff

Sensitivity to Students	Frequency	Valid Percentage
Never sensitive	5	4.9
Rarely sensitive	2	2.0
Sometimes sensitive	65	63.7
Sensitive at most times	21	20.6
Sensitive at all times	9	8.8
Total	102	100%

93.1% of the students rated the staff serving them as sometime sensitive or even so, at all times.

Table 8 Staff Concentration while serving Students

Concentration while serving you	Frequency	Valid Percentage
Never concentrate	3	2.9
Rarely concentrate	10	9.6
Sometimes concentrate	67	64.4
Concentrate at most times	17	16.3
Concentrate at all times	7	6.7
Total	104	100%

The table implies that Makerere and Nkumba staff sometimes concentrates while serving students. However, they have not done so at all times as required.

Table 9 Conduct of University Exams

Exam Conduct Process	Frequency	Valid Percentage
Excellent	8	7.7

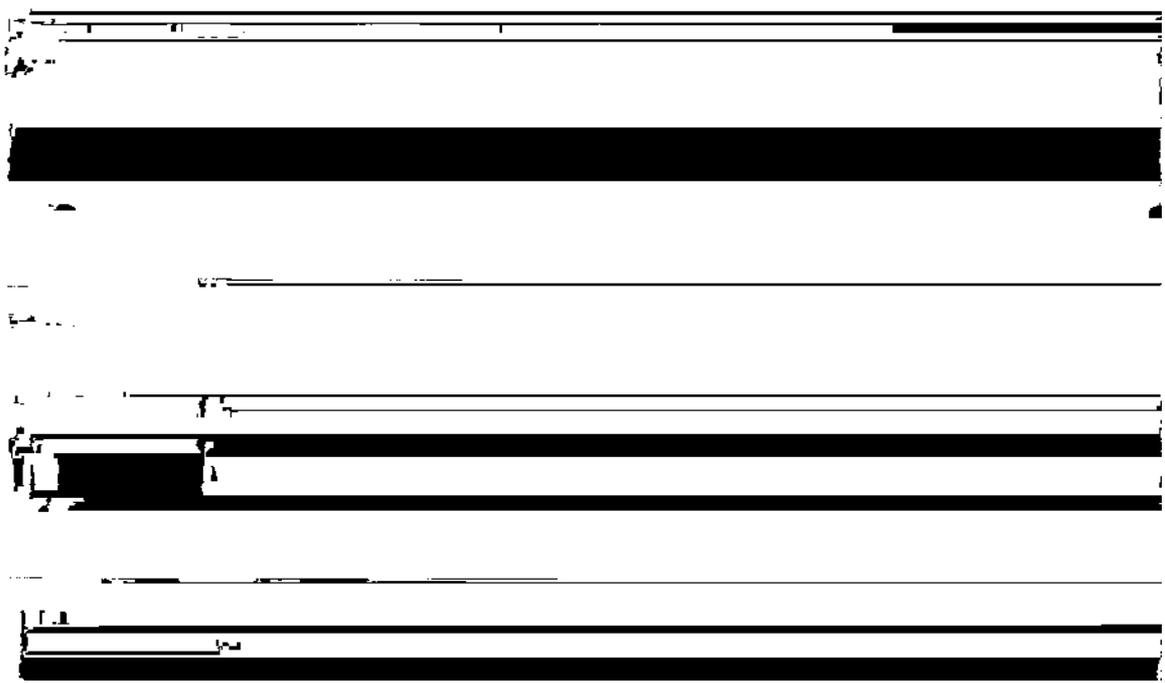


Table 11 Overall Student Satisfaction with University Services

Overall Satisfaction	Frequency	Valid Percentage
Never satisfied	2	1
Rarely satisfied	4	4
Sometimes satisfied	71	71
Satisfied at most times	17	17
Satisfied at all times	7	7
Total	100	100%

The overall satisfaction of students with university services is rated good in that they are sometimes or at most times satisfied.

The study was also interested in establishing the overall influence of university service and care to student satisfaction. Multiple regression results indicated that these two variables significantly influenced customer satisfaction and contribute 51% to the total satisfaction of students while pursuing their studies at these two universities. This deduction is from the table below:

Variable	Predicted Sign	B	T-Value	P-Value
Intercept		1.647	7.211	0.000
Service Delivery	+	0.544	5.480	0.000
Student Care	+	0.232	2.339	0.002
Adjusted r ²			0.513	
F-Ratio			49.921	

NB Dependent Variable: Student Satisfaction

The table indicates that service delivery and customer care are both very significant predictors of student satisfaction. The more universities care about their students and deliver services while practicing what the previous tables have indicated, the more satisfied the students will be.

Practical Implications

There is need for building a customer base through relationship marketing implementation by both universities. This can be done after realizing that relationship marketing is the integration of quality, customer service and marketing focused on not only winning customers but also on retaining them. Traditionally, marketing has focused on the winning of customers, not on their retention. Relationship marketing integrates the operational as well as marketing dimensions to ensure that the university is united in its objectives of delivering a quality service.

Secondly, any aspects where customer priorities and their perception of the university's performance are not in harmony must be ironed out. A marketing research technique used to measure service levels and to compare service levels between competitors should be put in place via tracer studies.

Thirdly, university management especially those who are in frequent contact with students such as the Registry have a number of specific responsibilities that include:

- i) Monitoring the existing customer base.
- ii) Assessing and measuring the quality of service provided.
- iii) Dealing with customer problems.
- iv) Ensuring effective two-way communication between the university and its customers.
- v) Identifying new market opportunities to serve and new potential customers.

- vi) Identifying how the services offered meet customer needs,
- vii) Developing business from existing customers, and
- viii) Ensuring that new courses are developed from existing and potential customers through market research.

Fourth, universities may also consider effective customer communication. Communication is the key to any relationship. Misunderstanding can be resolved and problems overcome as long as there is communication. Universities have had the problem of being good talkers but poor listeners. As a result, communication has tended to be rather one sided. The university that tells customers about what it offers and how to offer it will determine the feature of education quality in this country and beyond.

Lastly there is need for officers to handle complaints and evaluate compliments. Complaints and compliments are a valuable source of customer communication. In ordinary business few customers will actually complain (or compliment), they simply take their business elsewhere. Universities may be biased in their perceptions of complainers and so the messages are 'decoded' in a way which marginalizes their value. However, to overcome these barriers management must do a number of things, such as:

- i) Establishing systems so that all complaints or comments are reported, especially those given orally,
- ii) Positively seeking feedback through questionnaires, suggestions and by actually meeting students, talking with them, and listening to what they have to say.
- iii) Treating all student communication seriously and valuing it as direct response. Genuinely welcoming comments as opportunities for review - not being automatically defensive,
- iv) Establishing student panels and user groups, specially those selected to provide objective responses.

Conclusion

In line with the literature reviewed and empirical evidence provided, building a University Customer base must start with students treatment in a fair and considerate manner. Workers in these universities must do their work fairly and consistently. This research documents that quality service delivery in universities will be realized if university management and the lower level employees acted with composure, avoid hostility, concentrate on their work and are tolerant, among others with their clients complaints and compliments.

It has also proved empirically what Kotler 2004, Prokesch, 1995, and McKenna, 1991 noted as major requirements in quality service delivery. Therefore there is a strong need for building a customer base that these institutions might be neglecting.

Put another way, there is need for these universities to deliver value via service quality, reliability and responsibility as indicated in the models earlier.

References

- Bob Johnson 1988. Managing Operations: Institute of Management. Butter worth Heinemann, Oxford
- Bonnie Jansen (2007) Leadership tools for quality service, www.leadershiptools.com.
- Buzzell, R. & Gale, B. 1987. The PIMS Principles. New York Free Press.
- Buzzell, R. & Gale, B.T & Sultan R.G.M. 1976. Market Share: A key to profitability. Harvard Business Review, January-February: 197-106.

Chan K.C. and M.C. McDermott. 1999. Total Quality Customer Care: A Potent Quality Marketing Strategy. The Singapore Marketer.

Chan, K.C. and M. C. McDermoh 1996. Flexible Intelligent relationship management: The business success paradigm in a stake-holders society. The learning organization 3: 5-17.

Chattel), Alf 1995. Managing for the Future. London MacMillan Press.

a

Domingo, ReneT 1994 Global Competitiveness Through Total Quality. The Asian Manager, April p. 3:4-8.

Evans Joel R. and Laskin Richard L 1994. The Relationship Marketing Process: A Conceptualization and Application, Industrial Marketing Management 23,439-452.

Ian Smith 1997. Meeting Customer Needs. Butterworth Heinemamu Oxford, Second edition.

Irvin, R.A. & Michaels, E.G., 1989. Core Skills: Doing the right things right. The Mckinsey Quarterly, Summer: 4-19.

Kotler Philips, 2004. Marketing Management: Analysis Planning, Implementation, and Control. Prentice Hall, Eight edition.

~~Marketing Management: Analysis Planning, Implementation, and Control. Prentice Hall, Eight edition.~~

Mintzberg, H., & Waters, J.A. 1985. Of Strategies, deliberate and emergent. Strategic Management Journal, 6:257-272.

~~Mpaata T.K. 2005 The Effect of Subsidiary Tensions on Conflict and Cooperation in a Joint Venture. Unpublished post doctoral research.~~

Nsibambi, Appollo 2005 quoted in the Monitor Publication during the graduation speech. April 1, 2005*

Ofwono, L (2007) article to the New Vision Editor June, 2007.

~~Pennington, J. & Waterman, R.H. 1982. In search of excellence: New York: Warner.~~

Phillips, S., Dunkin, A., & Treece, J.B. 1990. King Customer: At companies that listen hard and respond fast, bottom lines thrive. Business Week, March 12:88-94.

Pfeffer, J. 1994. Competitive Advantage Through People: Unlashing the tp Tc(1994) Tj0 Tc(.powj0.078 Tw0.030 Tj0 T8