B2C e-commerce and customer satisfaction: The impact of customer and technology in service delivery in international hotels.

Conference Theme 3.3 Managing diversity within European firms

Workshop Paper

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ABSTRACT

Technology is altering the traditional concept of business and leaving very few areas of it untouched. One area of technology that is having a significant effect on traditional methods of business is self-service technology within the service industry. This adoption of technology based service solutions is often in place of face-to-face service solutions. In many instances the introduction of these self-service systems has been driven by cost rather than service considerations. This trend is particularly prevalent in the premium hotel sector of the hospitality industry. In this sector there is a growth of business to consumer technology solutions offered to captive consumers after the main purchase choice, the hotel's accommodation service, has been made. The introduction of these self-service technologies in premium hotels is dramatically altering a service industry where service levels are a key selling attribute and competition and the need for meeting customer expectations is intense. In the past, the implementation of undifferentiated service strategies within, and sometimes across, international hotel chains has been an effective marketing tool. This has partly been because a relatively culturally homogeneous group of western travellers were the predominant consumer in this sector. This in turn led to consistency of customer expectations. However, with the growth of global business and development of the new middle class in Asia, a greater diversity of consumers are now using the services of these international premium hotels. This paper initially considers the general barriers to the acceptance of technology based service provision in the service encounter. Subsequently we explore cultural issues that either amplify existing barriers to acceptance of technology based service solutions, or act as additional barriers to such acceptance. We also propose a number of propositions focusing on the domains of consumer behaviour and the related impacts on service management. These propositions apply the broad general concerns that are applicable to successful self-service implementation to a cross cultural setting looking specifically at the areas of power distance, uncertainty avoidance and time orientation.

Keywords: e-business, customer service, culture, international management

INTRODUCTION

The continual advances in technology are constantly changing the manner in which business is conducted. One business arena that has altered significantly through the introduction technology is the service encounter. The effect of technology on the service encounter has developed through the infusion of technology into the service delivery process. Traditionally this encounter was person to person but more recently it is becoming person to technology. It is likely that the service encounter will continue to evolve and that technology will continue to be the major determining force in service delivery in the future. Despite this, there is an absence of technology in service encounter research and in frameworks used by service marketers (Bitner et al., 2000). The majority of research on service encounters focuses on the traditional interpersonal nature of the service encounter, as traditionally this was the gauge to measure the standard of the encounter. It is becoming apparent however, that the introduction of technology in the service encounter is not only altering the traditional service encounter but in some cases eliminating the need for the personal interaction with service staff (Bitner et al., 2000). The continual infusion of technology in services marketing is demanding greater understanding of its effect on customer acceptance and satisfaction.

One such example of technology in the service encounter is self-service technologies. It was stressed by Parasuraman (1996) that the rise in self-service technologies demonstrates a fundamental shift in the nature of services. Self-service technologies are technological interfaces that allow the customer to produce the service independent of direct involvement from the service employee (Meuter et al., 2000a). The understanding of self-service is very important as its introduction is challenging traditional services marketing because it demonstrates that the customer-staff interface is no longer an essential element (Dabholkar, 2000; Meuter et al.,2000a).

Despite the growth of self-service technology, there is very little theoretical and empirical research investigating the customer's perceptions of and responses to these innovations (Walker and Craig-Lees, 1998; Bitner et al., 2000; Meuter et al., 2000a). As a result, many researchers have called for further investigation into this area (Bitner et al., 2000; Dabholkar, 1994, 1996; Globerson and Maggard, 1991; Meuter et al., 2000a; 2000b; Prendergast and Marr, 1994). Furthermore, the introduction of self-service technologies appears across a range of industries, such as banks (automatic teller machines), airlines (self-service boarding pass dispensers), petrol stations (pay at the pump facilities) and hotels (automated check-in and check-out facilities). Research is therefore needed to better understand customers' preferences with respect to self-service technology. Especially as continual increases in technological developments are only going to make the introduction of this service delivery option more prolific.

There have been calls for increased research into the relationship between the personal characteristics that clients bring to the service encounter and their interactions with technology. (Parasuraman and Grewal, 2000). Research into this relationship is particularly important for the premium hotel sector. These businesses have traditionally been considered high contact service settings with a high amount of personalised service (Bowen, 1990). However, there is now increasing introduction in the industry of self-service facilities. Thus consumers can often choose between personal service and using self-service technologies. In many instances, customers experience a mix of both service delivery modes. However, in some instances the customer is not given a service delivery choice as self-service technology is being introduced to replace interpersonal service. This is evidenced in automated room service ordering and housekeeping arrangements through the television. Other areas in the

hotel where the choice of self-service is being introduced includes check-in and check-out facilities and booking of recreational facilities.

While the pressure to replace the traditional service encounter with a technology based experience is an important factor in the business environment in which premium hotels operate, it is by no means the only pressure for change. While premium hotels have always catered for international visitors, the increased globalisation of trade, the rise of newly industrialised countries, and the emergence of the new Asian middle class have lead to an increasing divergence in the cultural backgrounds of both business and leisure clients. In this paper we argue that not only is the service encounter influenced by technological change, it also needs to be responsive to the way clients of different cultures perceive technology in customer service delivery.

The structure of this paper is as follows: we firstly discuss the positive and negative impacts that technology based customer service delivery may have on the service encounter. We then review the literature on culture and the service encounter. Finally, we suggest a series of consumer behaviour and service management propositions for further investigation.

THE SERVICE ENCOUNTER AND TECHNOLOGY

Reasons for implementing technology based service delivery

There are many different types of self-service technologies that can be introduced to help delivery services to customers. For example a customer may use an Automatic Teller Machine (ATM) rather than go into the bank and interact with the bank staff, or they may use

Pay at the Pump facilities at a petrol station rather than go into the petrol station and interact with the staff behind the counter, or they may use an automatic check out facility in their hotel room rather than go to the reception desk and interact with the front desk staff. By introducing self-service technologies, organizations are hoping to increase the speed and effectiveness of service delivery. The benefits that the organization can be deemed to achieve through the introduction of self-service technologies include cost savings, increased efficiency, and service standardisation (Meuter and Bitner, 1998). The customer, on the other hand may benefit through time and cost savings, greater control over the service delivery, reduced waiting time, enjoyment from technology interaction, increased location availability, and higher perceived level of customisation (Dabholkar, 1996; Meuter and Bitner, 1998). The introduction of self-service technology can therefore be perceived very favourably by a number of consumers and organisations.

The interpersonal element is one of the traditional defining features of services marketing and especially service encounter research (Gwinner et al, 1998). The introduction of self-service technology, although containing a number of positive outcomes for both consumers and organizations as outlined above, also has a number of negative outcomes due to possible reduction of the interpersonal element and the confusion this introduces to the service encounter. Research is needed to understand both the positive and negative aspects of self-service technology. Unfortunately, to limit the alienation of current and future customers, organisations need to focus predominately in the first instance on the negative factors and understand how these can be overcome to ensure that customers continue to be satisfied, repeat customers. It is with this in mind, that this paper investigates the effects of culture on the introduction of self-service technology.

Criticism has been raised by Hackett (1990) who cautions that the implementation of self-service technologies can also be perceived by customers as resulting in a lack of human intervention in the case of service failure, a lack of personal relationships between staff and customers, an overemphasis on cost savings, and reduced opportunities for cross-selling. Meuter and Bitner (1998) stress that there are six major concerns with self-service technologies. These pertain to; service recovery, reduced interpersonal contact with service employees, the elimination of the social experience in the service encounter, an overemphasis on organisational benefits, an overemphasis on technologically based competitive advantages, and the lack of sufficient costs savings. These issues highlight the need for careful planning and implementation of self-service technologies to reduce and ultimately eliminate these negative concerns (Dabholkar, 1996).

The following sections will briefly introduce the three of the above concerns that are of particular importance in a cross-cultural setting. These are service failure and service recovery, a reduction in interpersonal contact and the elimination of the social experience. Another concern will also be discussed, that of technology anxiety. These concerns are discussed in a general manner. The issue of culture will then be discussed and the two areas of self-service technology and culture will be integrated. It is here that the theoretical aspects of culture will be applied to the self-service concerns.

Service Failure and Service Recovery

When the service is delivered via self-service technology, when service failure occurs, as the very nature of self-service technology implies, as there is no service employee, immediate recovery is made more difficult. This service breakdown can include a technological breakdown, inability to complete the transaction, or false service expectations. Service

recovery extends also to facilities enabling the customer to complain to the service organization when something does go wrong (Meuter and Bitner, 1998). In a critical incident study, it was found that virtually all negative self-service technology encounters resulted from a service failure (Meuter et al., 2000b). In these instances, there were generally no opportunities to recover the failure. This demonstrates the importance of service design systems allowing customers to use technology to recover the service themselves wherever possible (Bitner et al., 2000).

Reduction in interpersonal contact and the elimination of the social experience

As mentioned previously, the research focus with regard to the service encounter and service delivery has largely focused on the traditional interpersonal element. This research has highlighted the importance of interpersonal interactions in satisfying customers and making them loyal to organizations (McCallum & Harrison, 1985; Suprenant & Solomon, 1987; Czepiel, 1990; Bitner, 1990; Bitner et al., 2000). However, with the introduction of self-service technologies these interpersonal interactions are reduced. As there has been such an emphasis placed on interpersonal interactions in determining customer satisfaction and customer loyalty, by decreasing this interaction this may reduce satisfaction levels and have a negative effect on customer satisfaction and customer loyalty.

While the service organization may have the ability to implement technology in the delivery of their services, the organization may prefer *not* to implement it. This is due to the potential loss of the person-to-person approach available in full-service options. Many consumers enjoy interactions with service employees during the service encounter. Previous research has found that the main reason for consumers not using Automatic Teller Machines (ATMs)

was a preference for dealing with humans in banking (Marr and Prendergast, 1991) and that some consumers have strong negative feelings about the use of technology in the service encounter and its effect on 'dehumanising' the encounter (Zeithaml and Gilly, 1987).

The enjoyment of the interpersonal interaction with the service employee often takes the form of a surrogate social encounter to many customers (Forman and Sriram, 1991). The decrease in personal contact therefore reduces the social element of the interaction. Research has found that to many customers this social element is a major factor in the formation of a long-term relationship with the service organization (Gwinner et al., 1998). Research investigating the importance of social encounters and self-service found that the loss of social interaction in self-service situations did not compensate for time savings gained through self-service facilities (Ledingham, 1984).

The effect of technology anxiety on self-service satisfaction.

As would be expected those consumers who use self-service technologies tend to be more comfortable with technology to begin with (Dabholkar, 1994). Therefore, it is likely that people have different perceptions and tolerances regarding the introduction of self-service technologies based on their level of technology acceptance and the importance of the human interaction to them during service delivery (Forman and Sriram, 1991; Dabholkar, 1996). Meuter et al. (2000b) found that technology anxiety was a better predictor of self-service usage than demographic characteristics such as age and gender, across a variety of service settings and self-service technologies. The results also indicate that not only does technology anxiety influence the actual usage but it also indicates the experience of using the self-service,

that is satisfaction levels, repeat usage and word-of-mouth. A low level of technology anxiety results in a favourable outcome for all aspects of self-service technologies.

Dabholkar (1996) notes that some studies have found that consumers enjoy interacting and playing with technology (Langeard et al., 1981; Holbrook et al., 1984) and it is suggested that this may reduce consumers' need for interaction with service employees. Later studies have also found similar results regarding consumers' enjoyment of technology (Igbaria, Iivari and Maragahh, 1995; Igbaria, Parasuraman and Baroudi, 1996). It is important to note, that perhaps in this instance those customers who may not place such significance on the social aspect of a person-to-person interaction may be more receptive to a person-to-technology interaction as the core service offering has greater significance in determining satisfaction than the manner the service is delivered.

There are approaches that can be used to limit customer uncertainty about self-service technologies and to minimise the negative impact of technology anxiety on usage and experience. These include: 1, designing the self-service technology with a customer focus; 2, the technology used in the process should be relevant to the task and not overly complicated; 3, training or educational programs should be available when self-service technologies are first introduced or encountered; 4, customers should be given a choice as to whether they use the self-service option or the interpersonal option enabling customers to select the service delivery mode that best suits them; and 5, customers may need an incentive or some other motivation to select the self-service option (Meuter et al., 2000b). The challenge for service organizations is to find an appropriate level of technology suitable for *their* target market, which enables them to enhance the customer satisfaction levels of this particular group.

The next half of this paper will explore the notion of culture and the possible impact this can have on the self-service issues raised previously. This second half of the paper begins with a look at the effect of culture in the organisational setting. The paper then focuses more on culture and marketing and specifically culture and the service encounter. The paper then concludes with an amalgamation of culture, self-service technology and the service encounter in the form of a series of propositions that have been developed to address potential shortcomings with the introduction of self-service technologies in the premium hotel sector. These propositions focus specifically on the effective and successful implementation, where appropriate, of self-service facilities in the premium hotel sector.

CULTURE

Culture in the organisational setting.

In recent times the model of national culture (power distance, uncertainty avoidance, individualism-collectivism and masculinity-femininity) suggested by Hofstede (1980) has been broadly accepted as a descriptor of national culture (Chow Shields and Chan, 1991; Shackelton and Ali, 1990; Triandis, 1982). In attempting to apply culture to the management of organizations five dimensions have been suggested that influence the managers manage (Hofstede, 1995; Hofstede and Bond, 1988). The fifth dimension is long and short-term time focus, also called Confucian values. We recognise that the model proposed by Hofestede is only one of many models of culture, and is not without its critics. However, it is a commonly used, readily operationalized model, which in our opinion, provides a workable cultural framework in which to investigate service delivery issues.

There is much debate as to the way in which culture contributes to organisational effectiveness. Divergent theorists argue that organizations are more effective and competitive when the practices in the organization are consistent with culture (Burns and Stalker, 1961; Earley, 1994; Powell, 1992). By contrast, convergent theorists see that organizations should transcend differences in national culture (Porter, 1986) and operate under a common corporate culture (Yip, 1992). Between these groups are researchers who argue that corporate culture can influence, but not eliminate, national cultural values (Adler ,1997, Ricks, Toyne and Martinez, 1990), or others who point to crossvergence, a combination of the organisational culture and national cultural values (Ralston, Holt and Terpstra, 1995, Ralston, Gustafson, Cheung and Terpstra, 1993).

Regardless of whether management is converging, diverging or crossverging, culture can be seen as having an important influence on the effectiveness of organizations. The solutions to the culture problem suggested by the theories are, respectively, to reflect, eliminate or adapt. However, in the service encounter, less opportunity exists to eliminate culture, or even to adapt the culture of the customer. While some e-service encounters may be culture free, we suggest that, in general, customer service managers are almost forced to follow a strategy of reflecting the culture of customers.

Culture and marketing

There has been a growing amount of literature on the relationship between culture and various aspects of marketing, for example segmentation (Taylor, 2000; Douglas and Wind, 1987; van den Berghe, 1995), sales practices (Murphy, 1999), advertising (Ahmed, 2000), purchasing

decisions (Chiou, 2000), sales management leadership style (Larsen, Rosenbloom, Anderson and Mehta, 1999), and marketing ethics (Singhapakdi, Rallappalli, Rao and Vittell, 1995).

Culture and the service encounter

The effect of culture has been highlighted in a number of studies focusing on service delivery and the service encounter. Within the area of service delivery, Winsted (1997) suggests that there are differences in the constructs United States and Japanese national groups use to assess service encounters, while Mattila (1999) extends this to specifically address the relationship between cultural frameworks and service evaluation. Dohntu and Yoo (1998) identified cross-cultural differences in expectations of service quality. In an empirical, cross cultural study in the hotel industry in Hong Kong, Armstrong, Mok, Go and Chan (1997) identified difficulties in measuring service quality caused by differences in both expectations and perceptions. Furrer, Liu and Sudharshan (2000), in a study that that addressed perceptions of the service encounter in retail banking, found support for a relationship between service encounter evaluation and Hofestede's (1991) cultural dimensions. What is important to note here, however, is that all of this previous research focuses on face-to-face service encounters, rather than those that utilise technology based customer service delivery strategies. There is no research to date that specifically addresses the effect of culture on self-service technology within the service encounter.

CULTURE, TECHNOLOGY AND SERVICE

In the previous sections of this paper we have discussed customer service and technology, and customer service and culture separately. In this section we suggest a number of propositions that bring these aspects together. As we are discussing both consumer behaviour and related

impacts on service management, we present propositions for both these domains.   This section is outlines the cultural theories and applies them to the dimensions highlighted earlier with regard to self-service technologies.   These dimensions include service recovery and service failure, the reduction in interpersonal contact and the elimination of the social experience and technology anxiety.

Our first propositions are based on Hofestede's power distance, uncertainty avoidance, and time dimensions.   Mattila (1999) suggests that in high power distance cultures, service employees, being of lower status, are expected to provide high levels of service customers. Research by Furrer et al (2000) supports this contention, and also suggests that those who are at the higher levels of society in large power distance cultures have high expectations in this regard.   It can be assumed that clients of premium hotels who come from cultures that have large power distance, are likely to be from the higher levels of society, and therefore are likely to expect high quality interpersonal service.   In addition, consistent with Donthu and Yoo (1998) customers from the higher level of high power distance cultures will be less tolerant of service failure.   They will also be less likely, because of the need to keep distance and save face (Hofestede, 1991), to either utilise self-service technology, or to seek assistance from low level service employees in the case of service failure resulting from the customer's unfamiliarity with the service delivery systems.   Similarly, customers from high uncertainty avoidance cultures will be less likely to utilise self-service technology than those from low uncertainty avoidance cultures. Finally, reliability, responsiveness and empathy are important to long-term oriented cultures (Furrer et al. 2000).   While all three of these items may be modified by the move from interpersonal to self-service technology, it is empathy that we suggest will have the most effect.

Hypothesis further research prio.. suggest props

This leads us to the following propositions:

Consumer Behaviour Propositions

1. Clients from high power distance cultures are less likely to accept self-service technology than those from low power distance cultures.

2. Clients who come from high power distance where saving face is an important component of the culture will be less willing to utilise unfamiliar self-service technology for service delivery.

3. Clients who come from high power distance cultures where saving face is an important component of the culture will be less likely to report service failure with self-service technology.

4. Clients from high uncertainty avoidance cultures will be less likely to utilise self-service technology than those from low uncertainty avoidance cultures.

5. Clients from high power distance cultures will be less likely to return to organizations where they perceive self-service technology delivery solutions inadequately meet their service delivery needs, than those from low power distance cultures.

6. Clients from high uncertainty avoidance cultures power distance will be less likely to return to organizations where they perceive self-service technology delivery solutions inadequately meet their service delivery needs, than those from low uncertainty avoidance cultures.

7. Clients who come from cultures with a long-term orientation are less likely to utilise new self-service technology delivery solutions than other clients

Flowing from the consumer behaviour propositions outlined above, we have used inductive reasoning to suggest a number of service management challenges that also may exist in the resulting organisational context:

Service Management Propositions

1. Clients will delay effective implementation of self-service technology delivery solutions because of lack of acceptance due to the cultural reasons (high power distance, high uncertainty avoidance, long term time orientation).

2. Organizations will have difficulty in maintaining the quality of the service experience because of the reluctance of clients to utilise self-service technology delivery system due to cultural reasons (high power distance, high uncertainty avoidance, long term time orientation).

3. Organizations will have difficulty in maintaining quality of the service experience, because there will be less opportunity for service recovery to occur due to the lack of reporting of self-service technology delivery failures due to cultural reasons (high power distance, high uncertainty avoidance, long term time orientation).

4. Management commitment to self-service technology delivery solutions will decrease as a response this lack of reporting of service failures.

CONCLUSION

This paper has introduced an area of research that has important practical and theoretical implications. Technology is dramatically altering the manner that business is conducted and this speed and effect of this business change is only going to continue to occur. One area that this change is being felt is the service encounter. Traditionally these encounters have been person-to-person but they are now frequently becoming person-to-technology through the

introduction of self-service technologies.   One service industry where these service developments are having a large effect is the premium hotel sector.   Not only has the introduction of self-service technology reduced the interpersonal interaction that the customer has traditionally had with service employees.   But is also raises apprehension regarding the acceptance of these technologies by the various customer groups of these hotels.   The broad concerns of service failure, reduction of interpersonal contact and social benefits, and technology anxiety are enhanced even further when the effect of culture is considered.   This paper suggests some initial propositions focusing on the domains of consumer behaviour and the related impacts on service management.   Further research is needed to test these propositions in a cross-cultural setting in the premium hotel sector.   The propositions proposed in this paper may also be applicable in other settings beyond premium hotels. Specifically other settings where culture is a possible concern.   Service industries which have both these mixes (self-service technologies and culture) may include tourist destinations and airports.   For example, airports have introduced E-Ticketing and self-check in facilities.   The discussions in this paper may also extend to these types of other service industries.

There is currently little research that addresses the issue of culture and self-service technologies.   Although culture is likely to have a significant effect on the use and acceptance of self-service technology, it is by no means the only factor that affects this.   It is possible that a number of personality traits such as social motivation and technology attitudes will also have an effect.   Demographic factors such as age, education and sex have also been investigated with regard to technology acceptance (Igbaria, Pavri and Huff, 1989).   It is likely that these may also affect the usage and acceptance of self-service technologies.   Therefore as the introduction of self-service technologies into the service encounter are only reasonably recent, there are still a lot of unknown factors, of which culture is only is only one.   Keeping this in mind, however, with the development of global business and the growth of technology in the service encounter there is an increasing need to focus on culture and self-service technology and to understand the relationship between them.

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