

Customer Relations ; Need for Comprehensive Approach

Satish G. Hegde

Nandakumar Mekoth

Many business organisations in India consider customer relations as an additional attempt to keep customers in good humour. Possibly, this thinking comes in the way of development of true and professional relationship with customers. Customer relation is a necessity not a luxury for business success.

Relation between any two or more parties will develop only if there is mutual benefit. It is not confined only to customer relations. It is equally applicable in social relations (like marriages) and friendly relations or intellectual relations (like exchange of knowledge and ideas). Only differentiating factor could be that in some relations benefit could be in monetary terms and in some others the benefit could be in non-monetary terms.

Similarly, a true customer relation is possible if and when both customer and marketer perceive benefits to them. Obviously, a marketer will not be interested in a business deal if expenses are more than revenue. On the other hand, a customer will not patronise a product/service if he/she perceives poor value for money' unless the organisation is in a 'seller's market' which is rare in today's competitive situation.

But, the question arises as to whether the present customer relation programmes of various private as well as public sector organisations really stem from the desire to provide benefit to customers. The answer is not a sure

'yes'. Customer relation programmes like Customer's Day in banks and other programmes in private organisations are questionable on the ground that they are superficial.

Madhukar (1990) observes in his book, *Dynamics of Bank Marketing* that the initial business transaction becomes a starting point... to establish relationship that ensures repeat business. Here again, certain measures like design of quality service and creation of positive corporate image which are necessary for preparing the customer to have relation with business are ignored. In brief customer relation should not be viewed as a post-purchase exercise, rather a comprehensive phenomenon covering both creation and delivery of satisfying product/service.

Without much change in the worth (value) of the product/service offered, what is the meaning in trying for customer relation during post purchase period? People who are not oriented towards marketing may call it as an extended step of exploitation. Therefore, any organisation which intends to develop customer relation should achieve customer satisfaction. As customer relation seeks to ensure sustained customer satisfaction, initial satisfaction is fundamental to customer relation.

Emphasising on customer relationship marketing, Kotler (1991, p. 48) suggests the five different levels: basic, reactive, accountable, proactive and partnership. But customer

Satish G. Hegde is lecturer, Department of Management Studies, Goa University.
Nandakumar Mekoth is lecturer, Department of Commerce, Goa University.

relationship is used here in a restrictive sense to mean only sale or post sale activities. Therefore, the relationship marketing does not cover pre sale activities which will prepare consumer's mind to have relation with the prospective enterprise.

Customer Relation through Quality :

The first and foremost in the process of customer satisfaction is quality. By quality we do not mean just the conformance to standards set by design or quality control department of the organisation. Quality is what consumers expect of a product or service in a given competitive market. Obviously, it is a relative concept where customers compare the offer against the rest in access. Hence, design and delivery of quality product/service is fundamental to customer relation.

A comprehensive view of customer relation may be classified into two approaches: proactive approach and reactive approach.

Proactive Approach

Proactive approach to customer relation refers to those which encourage and initiate development of relation between customer and marketer. Needless to say it is the beginning of relation between buyer and seller. Here, the effort to develop positive attitude towards the company and products may start even before the existence of the product. Hence, the relation between buyer and seller need not start after the close of the sale, it can originate even through communication. Specifically, the measures to have proactive relations can be listed as follows :

1. **Advertising, Publicity and Relations :** Positive corporate and product images can be developed through advertising

publicity can help consumer to have realistic expectations about product/service performance. This can be done before as well as after sales. While definitions on public relations are many, there is agreement among them about performance and recognition. It is observed that PR stands for performance and recognition' (Wilcox, Ault and Agree, 1986). Needless to say a favourable public relation for which an organisation has to make conscious efforts will create a favourable mind set for customer relation. Obviously, the emphasis here is more on preparing customers psychologically to have relation with the organisation rather than organisation trying separately and exclusively for customer relations.

2. **Design and delivery of quality products to satisfy consumer needs.**
3. **Effective personal selling will reinforce mass media information like advertising and also help in achieving sales.** Kirkpatrick and Russ (1981, p. 383) suggest certain steps like learning names of customers, remembering their preferences and prejudices and maintaining individual records to build sound customer relationship. This shows that customer relationship is viewed superficially rather than as a philosophy throughout the organisation. Superficial efforts are short lasting as customers are also wise enough to understand the motives.

Ingram and LaForge (1989, p. 70) consider relationship with customers primarily as a responsibility of sales persons. Clearly, sales persons' responsibilities are that of personal

selling. Therefore, they have taken a restrictive view of customer relation as others.

Reactive Approach

Reactive approach refers to those which prevents cessation of relation with customers. Further, it also prevents termination of corporate image by negative word of mouth communications by dissatisfied customers. Companies, in this approach provide consumers an easy avenue to report their grievances and seek redress. However, reactive approach is not restricted only to complaints and redressal but covers suggestions, appreciations and testimonials. The reactive approach includes the following :

1. **Receiving and redressing complaints :-** Where customers report their dissatisfaction to manufacturer or seller to seek redressal such as repair, refund, replacement or it could be just a desire to have patient hearing of grievances. Unfortunately, many Indian organisations think that complaints are problems without realising the fact that problems lead to complaints and will become serious if unattended.
2. **Testimonials :-** Many companies in the US like Procter and Gamble have used consumer testimonials in their advertising campaigns.

Some of the consumer feed backs help in revising instructions for use on the labels, for example, Procter and Gamble has included additional instructions on their food packets for the consumers living in high altitudes.

Conclusion

In all, customer relations should not be viewed in a narrow sense that it is a programme by which buyer-seller interaction for understanding and enhancing business. Additionally, customer relation first takes place in the mind than in business deal. For this, the organisation

should emphasise on communicating and convincing present and potential customers about total satisfaction. Possibly, relationship between buyer and seller begins of expectation of satisfaction and turns to strong relation like brand loyalty if it develops. Therefore, a marketer can think of having a true and lasting relation only when the product/service provides maximum value for money.

Instead, if customer relation is attempted only as a superficial step without much of attention to both proactive and reactive customer relation approaches, it will be artificial, unsuccessful and branded as exploitative high pressure selling tactic. In such a case it will fail eventually or succeed till customers have alternatives.

Customer relation in both product and service organisations begins with their offer, continues with the consumption and lasts so long as it is mutually rewarding. Therefore, customer relation programmes should include both proactive and reactive approaches so that every transaction is mutually rewarding and will contribute towards customer relation. A strong customer relation is fundamental to the success of any organisation.

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