

HANDLING CUSTOMER COMPLAINTS IN THE INDIGENOUS FOOD VENDING INDUSTRY

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Abstract

Format of customer complaint management process within formal organization has received considerable attention in the literature at the expense of informal sectors of most countries. Drawing on the work of Hansen et al. (2009), this paper examines operational complaint management procedure in the indigenous food vending industry in Ghana and customers complaint reaction.

The paper presents result from quantitative research involving one thousand two hundred and ten (1,210) customers selected using convenience sampling technique, who visited ten (10) main traditional food vending restaurants within the Ho Township.

The study conclusively shows consumers adopt passive and voiced attitude in complaint reaction. Furthermore, while vendors attempt in managing customer complaint in practice, however, in principle compensating customers is completely absent. We recommend participatory approach in determining what is fair and reasonable in determining customer compensation.

Keywords: Customer complaints, complaint handling process, indigenous food vending industry

1 Introduction

Client or customer potential complaints are regular feature in every industry where there is continuous interaction between people. These complaints emanate from a perceived gap between expectations of service that may not always be matched with the service received. According to Boshoff (1997) complaints are a natural consequence of any service activity because mistakes are an unavoidable feature of all human endeavour and

service delivery. Eccles & Durand (1998) suggested customers always complain because they only want what they were denied. For example a study by Andreasen & Best (1977) found out conclusively that consumers experience problems in about 20 % of their purchases, complain to seller 40% of the time.

In this season of incessant and intense competition, many service delivery firms aim at retaining a pool of loyal and profitable customers through the offer of excellence and high quality services, but, Hart et al. (1990) advises that mistakes, complaints and failures are to be anticipated. This is particularly spot on in the indigenous food vending industry in Ghana which is highly patronized and remain one of the most important sector of the economy due to its close association with the Tourism and Leisure industry. However, Gilly & Hansen (1992) have demonstrated that effective complaint handling may convert upset clientele into content and faithful ones and others believe customer complaint or feedback is a “gift” (Barlow & Moller, 1996) because it emphasis the readiness of the customer to still do business with you. Thus the customer still cares about the relationship they have with your company and wants you to fix the problem.

It is to be noted that for organizations, attracting new customers is more costly and less profitable than retaining the existing ones (Schlesinger & Heskett, 1991; Ovenden, 1995; Johnston, 2001). Whilst Nyer (2000) agrees that consumer complaints are useful sources of information that help marketers identify sources of dissatisfaction, and therefore should be encouraged, other authors agreed learning from mistakes can sometimes be costly (Johnston & Mehra, 2002; Hodgetts, 1998; Atalik, 2007). For example unhappy customers do create awful reputation for organizations by informing them of their service experience (Blodgett et al., 1995; Stauss & Schoeler, 2004).

Since the systematic study into customer complaint behaviour was published by Andreasen & Best (1977) and Day et al. (1981), the field has received considerable attention over the year. However, many inconsistencies of findings across countries were identified (Mayer & Morganosky, 1987, Han et al., 1995). Further analysis of the literature reveals that the study into complaint management has been lobbied sided. Majority of the studies highlights these complaint management or handling procedures in corporate organization (Heung & Lam, 2003; Ngai et al., 2007) and only limited number of studies has empirically examined these procedures in the informal sector. Especially nothing is known about procedures for dealing with complaining customers within the indigenous food vending restaurant in Ghana where complaint management procedures leave much to be desired. These experiences are reported they-in and day-out

by clients who patronized indigenous food markets. For example, a personal experience by one of the authors goes as follows:

..... there was this instance that the researcher observed at the Tema community one market where a customer came to buy “wakye” (a popular traditional food) from a vendor. Few seconds after service, the customer complained to the seller of weevils in the “wakye”. Shockingly, the vendor rained insults on the customer. This scenario became heated as other customers waiting to be served joined the frenzy. Eventually, everybody left without buying.

Earlier inquiries suggests several advantages in effective and efficient complaint management such as customer satisfaction and hence loyalty (Berry & Parasuraman, 1991), promotion of less waste in resources and time (Ramsey, 2003), and customer perception of quality and reduced negative word of mouth (Mitchell, 1993; Hodgetts, 1998). In this vein, efficient complaint handling is paramount and inevitable considering the numerous benefits it can offer.

The present study therefore aims to add to the existing knowledge base by addressing three important research issues (i) established which category of workers complaint most based on their demographic profile (ii) determine the type of complaint made and customers complaint reaction and (iii) ascertain the complaint handling process by vendors.

Research Question

Specifically, the research sought to find answers to the following four research questions

- What category of workers complain most based on their demographic profile?
- What type of complaints are made by dissatisfied customers?
- How do customers react to service failure situations?
- How do vendors handle customer complaints?

2. Literature Review

A complaint is an expression of dissatisfaction, about the standard of service, actions or lack of action by an organization to an individual. According to Jacoby & Jaccard (1981, p. 6) it is “an action taken by an individual which involves communicating something negative regarding a product or service.” Crié (2001) assert that it will be based on the perceived dissatisfaction with a product, a service or an event in the course of the buying process or during the consumption. Diamond et al. (1976) further argues this dissatisfaction is based on the customer’s feelings and perception. This view is very significant in the services domain since quality evaluation to a certain degree is based on customer’s subjectivity (Diamond et al., 1976)

and failure in services can affect customer outcome and service process (Tax et al., 1998; Smith et al., 1999).

Complaint management is the way in which companies systematically handle problems in customer relations (Jeschke et al., 2000). According to Johnston (2001) cited in Hansen et al. (2009:7) it “involves the receipt, investigation, settlement and prevention of customer complaints and recovery of the customer”. A customer complaint is a report from a consumer providing documentation about a problem with a product or service or again, is any expression of dissatisfaction by a customer or potential about customer delivery or a product by the company or its agents (Landon, 1980). Gilly et al. (1991) argue this processes can be likened to information processing in an organization. The goal is to stabilize customer relationships that are at risk and to assure a specific level of quality by creating a consistent business environment regarding personnel.

Singh (2000) argue that consumers have a range of alternatives to express their dissatisfactions. According to Crie & Ladwein (2002) four main typologies have been proposed to differentiate complainants from non-complainants in the literature. According to Mowen & Minor (2008) a dissatisfied consumer may decide not to repurchase a firm’s product or services as legitimate responses after bad buying behaviour. Singh (2000) classifies consumers engaging in such behaviour as "passives" (Stauss & Seidel, 2004). Secondly, consumers can decide to take private action involving only people inside the consumer’s group in informal ways. That may include changing the brand supplier, ceasing to use the product or service, or warning family and friends. This action may aim at "getting even and punitive aims" (Zeithaml et al., 2000). This group is classified as "voicers" (Stauss & Seidel, 2004). Thirdly, consumers can take some form of public actions involving people and organizations outside the consumer’s group in more formal ways. These may be seeking redress directly from the seller or manufacturer and taking legal action against the seller or manufacturer. They may also be registering a complaint with the seller of manufacturer, a public consumer protection agency, or a private consumer organization (Day & Ash, 2007). Complainants may also create a new company to provide a better product or service (Day et al., 1981). The main purpose of these consumer complaints is to "recover economic loss by getting an exchange or a refund and rebuild self-image (Davidow & Dacin, 2007). This group is classified as "irates" (Stauss & Seidel, 2004). Finally, consumers may take a variety of different private and public actions. Consumers may blame sellers and manufacturers for their unsatisfactory product or service. They may choose to boycott sellers and manufacturers by ceasing to use their products or services and spread negative information

about their products or services. (Zeithaml et al., 2000). This last group is classified as "activists" (Stauss & Seidel, 2004).

Carney (1996) and Behrens et al. (2007) advise it is essential for a firm to have an effectual response when a complaint takes place. This should be seen in the form of the quality of the reply, ability to address customers concern and perception and plan for future prevention. Various authors have separately tried to conceptualized complaint management process. For example, Wysocki et al. (2010) identifies three important aspects of the complaint process which includes (i) activity seeking customer complaints; (ii) recognizing the type of customer that is complaining; and (iii) responding appropriately based on the type of complainants. Adamson (1993) suggests that complaint management should be evolved through a four-stage process starting with an in-depth analysis and strategic use of past complaints and results. Cook & Macaulay (1997) deal with the rather normative concept of empowered complaint management. Important elements in this concept include a positive and proactive (non-defensive) attitude towards complaints, fast reply and simple solution, and that complaint handlers should be regarded as an important part of the company. Johnston (2001) however, supports the operational view on complaint management which advocates for the process by which complaints are handled and customers recovered. The proponents of operational view on complaint management process argued for speedy response, reliability, and consistency of response, ease of access to the complaint process, keeping the complainant informed, and well-trained staff who understand the complaint process (Hart et al., 1990; Johnston, 2001; Barlow & Moller, 1996; Boshoff, 1997) for successful implementation of complain management process. Hansen et al. (2009) categorized operational view on complaint management into three sub-dimensions: (i) complaining accessibility; (ii) retailer-customer interaction; and (iii) compensation policy. According to Hansen et al. (2009) it is important the retailer convinces his/her customers that complaints are welcome and that they will be handled seriously. Since Johnston (2001) and Boshoff (1997) asserted mistakes are an unavoidable feature of all human endeavour and complaints are a natural consequence of any service. This may imply that if a retailer receives only few complaints, it could be dissatisfied consumers are just switching to a competitive retailer without voicing a complaint (Goodmann, 1999; Stephens & Gwinner, 1998) or if the customer is uncertain on where/or how to deliver the complaint or, even worse, if the customer doubts the retailers interest in receiving the complaint (Hansen et al., 2009). Retailer-customer interaction stress a complaint process where customers are more interested in obtaining a fair and serious procedural treatment rather than specific result of the complaint process (Lind & Tyler, 1988; Greenberg, 1990). Saxby et al. (2000) supported this view and argue

that consumers are always occupied with obtaining procedural justice, which according to Sheppard et al. (1992) can be termed perceived fairness of a process that culminates in an event, decision, or action. Hansen et al. (2009: 11) suggested a situation where “customers feels exposed to a poor retailer-customer interaction cannot necessarily be compensated by a favourable outcome of the process”. Davidow (2003) asserted customer dissatisfaction can also take place during the complaint process. It is therefore imperative retailers welcome complaints and treats them seriously with positive attitude during the process. Hansen et al. (2009) further suggested the principal motive for complaining is his/her perceived loss and consequently would be expectant of reimbursement or compensation in any of the following forms offering price-reductions, repair or exchange of poor products (Hui & Au, 2001).

Blodgett et al. (1995) suggested interactive justice carries a heavier weight which implies fair settlements or distributive justice is not enough. It is therefore imperative for customers to be treated with such values including empathy, courtesy, honesty, and politeness (Tax et al., 1998). Chase & Dasu (2001) further argue that whether compensation and reaction is perceived as appropriate is dependent on the kind of failure that occurred. For example financial or tangible reactions are appropriate when there has been a loss of economic resources or there has been a problem meeting demands and an intangible reaction is seen as adequate in the case of a loss of social resources and in the case of failures in the process caused by employee’s behaviour (Chase & Dasu, 2001). Smith et al. (1999) also argue the scale of the failure also has an impact on the evaluation of the compensation. The social exchange theory suggests that the value of the exchanged goods, the loss perceived by the client and the recovery measure should be balanced (Hoyer & McInnis, 2010).

3. Methodology

A quantitative technique, specifically descriptive approach was adopted. This method was deemed suitable because the authors only sought to find out customers complain reaction and complaint management procedure in the traditional food vending industries (Punch, 2005; Jackson, 2009; Saunders et al., 2012).

A total of one-thousand four-hundred (1,400) customers were sampled using convenience sampling techniques. This approach is to help the researchers select the most accessible subjects and it is least costly in terms of time and effort (Oisín, 2007; Marshall, 1996) since the target population is infinite. The study considered only customers who have ever made a complaint after purchase. Similarly, ten (10) traditional food vending restaurants were sampled using purposive sampling technique. This allows

the researchers to deliberately focus on restaurants that only offer customers local foods and also are heavily patronized by all classes of workers (Kerlinger, 1986; Pope, 2000).

A structured interview was the main instrument used to collect data from the customers for the study. The use of this instrument is to assist in achieving reliability by promoting greater consistency and further help to reduce the possibility of interviewer bias (Malhotra & Birks, 2003). The survey instruments consist of three parts. The first part assesses the most frequent complaint base on demographic properties of the respondents. The second part was about respondent's complaint reaction based on the study of (Singh, 2000; Stauss & Seidel, 2004) and the type of complaint made by customers. The third part focuses on the assessment of complaint management procedure based on the study of Hansen et al. (2009). List questions were used for evaluating respondent's demographic profile, frequency of their patronage and complaint reaction and complaint type. Customers assessment of vendor's complaint management procedure was measured using a five (5) point likert scale (1= strongly agreed; 2= agreed; 3= normal; 4= disagreed; 5=strongly disagreed), aimed at determining views and experiences (Shaw & Pieter, 2000) on complaint accessibility, retailer-customer interaction and compensation policy (Hansen et al., 2009). The questionnaire was administered over a period of 7 consecutive days (1 week) - Monday to Sunday, throughout the day. It covered 20 questionnaires per day and involved ten (10) well trained research assistants between 3rd to 9th February 2014. The research assistants were detailed to administer the questionnaire, interpret the questions in the local language and record the responses by checklist. A total of one thousand two hundred and ten (1,210) usable questionnaires were received after editing, giving a response rate of 88.05%.

The SPSS statistical package was used in data input and results were analyzed using descriptive statistics and are expressed as numbers and percentages.

4. Results and Discussions

Table 1 below evaluates four (4) variables related to respondents' demographic profile and two (2) other factors related to the regularity at which respondents patronized the food joints. The aim of this section is to determine which category complaint most. The study indicates that more females (57.52%) complained compared to males (42.48%). In probing customers' marital standing, majority of the complaints came from those who are married (62.48%) followed by divorcees (26.28%). This is not surprising since most women are experts in managing their kitchens at homes and they cook well to suit their taste. They are therefore likely to

contrast their home environment and homemade foods to the ones being purchased.

Table 1: Demographic Profile

Gender	Frequency	Percentage
Female	696	57.52
Male	514	42.48
Marital Status		
Married	756	62.48
Single	136	11.24
Divorcee	318	26.28
Age (years)		
18-24	197	16.25
25-34	91	7.50
35-44	166	13.75
45-54	484	40.00
55 or above	272	22.50
Level of Education		
SSCE/WASSCE/GCE “O&A” Level	61	5.00
Undergraduate	469	38.75
Postgraduate	529	43.75
Others	151	12.50
Duration of Patronage of Vended food.		
Less than a year	151	12.50
Between 1 year to 1 year, 9 months	439	36.25
Between 3 years to 3 years, 9 months	529	43.75
Above 4 years	91	7.50
Frequency of Patronage of Vended food in a day		
Once in a day	136	11.25
Twice a day	408	33.75
Thrice in a day	666	55.00

Source: *Field Survey 3rd to 9th February 2014*

For the age of respondents, majority of the complainants are within the age group of 45-54yrs and 55yrs above by a score of 40.00 and 22.50 respectively. Further analysis of educational levels show that customers attaining post graduate level of education complained most (43.75%) followed by undergraduate level by a score of 38.75%. This may also be due to the fact that with a higher education, customers are more knowledgeable about their rights and they may have a better way of going round their difficulty.

Additionally, the study also found out that customers, who had patronized the vended foods between 3 years to 3 years, 9 months complained most (43.75%) followed by between 1year to 1year, 9 months by a score of 36.25%. Finally on the frequency of patronage in a day, customers who visited thrice (55%) in the day complained most. This can also be narrowed down to the fact that, their consistency get them acquainted to the vendors and afford them the confidence and courage to complaint and go around the problem is a beautiful way.

The second table shown below was to gauge respondents view on type of complaints lodged and customer's reaction to vendor's response. The result from the table indicates a score of 39.92% that respondents major complaint was about food presentation, taste, appearance, etc. This is followed by attitude of the sales person or vendor (26.86%) and sales environment (17.60%). In further assessing the reaction of the customers to vendor's response, majority of the respondents adopted passive (54.38%) attitude. Followed by voicing with a score of 29.09%. The nature of their reaction epitomises the inadequacies of consumer protection laws and lack of institutions to support them in taking legal actions or accessing remedies for their problems. However, the passive and voicing posture of the consumers cannot be condoned with since spreading of bad news and influencing family and friends not to patronized their products can affect their bottom line.

Table 2: Types of Complaint and Customers Complaint Reaction

Types of Complaint		
Response	Frequency	Percentage
Food presentation, taste, appearance, etc	483	39.92
Dressing/Appearance of the vendor	123	10.17
Attitude of the sales person or vendor	325	26.86
Sales environment	213	17.60
Service time	66	5.45
Types of Customers Complaint Reaction		
Passivers	658	54.38
Voicers	352	29.09
Irates	124	10.25
Activists	76	6.28

Source: *Field Survey 3rd to 9th February 2014*

Table 3 below measures the customer assessment of vendor's complaint management process. The 1,210 respondents who provided usable questionnaires were asked to indicate the extent to which they agreed or disagreed with a range of eleven (11) statements which are related to complaint management. The idea was to determine the degree to which the vendors in the study are meeting the needs of potential customers in relation to complaint management. Three dimensions specifically, procedural justice/complaining accessibility, interactional justice/retailer-customer interaction and distributive justice/ compensation policy of operational view on complaint management advanced by Hansen et al. (2009) was among the factors considered for the analysis.

Complaint accessibility or procedural justice was examined under three (3) main statements. As to whether vendors react swiftly to customer's complaint, 62.6% disagreed. However, majority of the respondents agree by a score of 67% that vendors gave them the chance to elucidate on their problem. Again, respondents disagreed by a score of 54.84% largely that the grievance management process of the vendors was just.

Four (4) statements were employed in the studies to evaluate retailer-customer interaction or interactional justice for vendor's complaint management. According to the study, by a score of 60.61%, respondents agreed employees/vendors seemed to be concerned about their difficulty and by a score of 80.19% employees understood their exact problem. Whilst customer disagreed by a score of 61.8% they felt treated courteously, by a score of 59.2% they agreed the vendors seem keen to solve their problems.

Table 3 : Customer Assessment of Vendors Complaint Management Process

Factors	Responses In Percentage				
	SA	A	N	D	SD
Complaining Accessibility/Procedural Justice					
Vendor quickly reacted to my complaint.	20.3	17.1	-	40.2	22.4
Vendor gave me the opportunity to explain my point of view of the problem.	43.17	23.83	1.36	21.27	10.37
Overall, the vendor's complaint handling procedure was fair.	18.76	25.76	0.67	42.18	12.63
Retailer-Customer Interaction/Interactional Justice					
The employees seemed to be very interested in my problem.	15.35	44.81	7.12	32.72	-
The employees understood exactly my problem.	39.12	41.07	-	14.75	5.06
I felt treated politely by the employees.	8.73	29.47		54.31	7.49
The employees were very keen to solve my problem.	24.09	35.11	2.03	24.35	14.42
Compensation Policy/Distributive Justice					
I received an adequate compensation from the company.	11.02	25.31	0.9	45.36	17.41
I received about as much compensation from the	7.35	26.17	-	50.23	16.25

company as in the context of previous complaints.

In solving my problem, the company gave me exactly what I needed. 13.98 22.76 4.07 47.11 12.08

Overall, the compensation I received from the company was fair. 10.3 9.09 - 46.67 33.94

Source: *Field Survey 3rd to 9th February 2014*

SD– Strongly Disagree, A – Agree, N– Neutral, A- Agree and SA – Strongly Agree.

Four (4) statements were further used for the analysis of compensation policy or distributive justice for vendor's complaint management. Regarding receiving compensation for their problem, the responses for all statements were depressing. 62.77% disagreed they received adequate compensation from the vendors; 66.48% disagreed they received almost similar compensation in the context of previous complaints; 59.19% disagreed vendors gave them exactly what they needed; and finally, 80.61% disagreed that by and large, the compensation they received from the vender was fair.

Whilst vendors appear to do well with complaint accessibility and customer-retailer interaction, it is a however disappointing to reveal that vendors both reacted quickly to their complaint and also felt they were not treated civilly. The weakest link in the operational view relating to complaint management is the total disagreement by customers regarding the compensation package after making complaint. This is worrying since there is no legal obligation for them to do so and consumers failed to demonstrate or defend claim for compensation. Furthermore, there is no well laid down procedure to assess each case individually to determine the need for any compensation. The down side is that if customers complaints are not dealt with effectively, it can affect your client's loyalty and damage your reputation.

5. Conclusion

It is hard to envisage a consumer transaction in any business not susceptible to problems and complaints. Neither should it be difficult to appreciate why businesses make determined efforts to avert and react to such complaints. Research demonstrate that companies attract and keep customers when they follow customer service standards and policies that prevent problems from arising, and are honest, fair and responsive when things go wrong.

However, in Ghana, there has always been a mounting apprehension about the inadequacies of complaint management procedure by consumers who patronize traditionally vended foods. This experiential study is therefore aimed at unraveling the views of customers in relation to types of

complaint, customers' complaint reaction and vendor's complaint management process.

It was clear from the study that food presentation, taste, appearance and attitude of the sales person or vendor are the two major complaint lodge by consumers. Furthermore, customers mostly adopted the passive and voice attitude in dealing with complaints. While the study demonstrates in practice vendors attempt in managing customer complaint, significant of note is that in principle they largely pay any attention to compensating their customers. This attitude of vendors reflects the old age belief where providers of services always feel the services they render to their client is a privilege. This evidence further affirms why owners of businesses consider compensating customers as a cost since they are uneducated to know it cost more to replace a dissatisfied customer than to retain an existing customer. The view that customers are not treated courteously during retailer customer interaction is a serious impediment to effective complaint management since according to Blodgett et al. (1995) interactive justice has a greater impact than distributive justice.

Implication

In conclusion it is gratifying to reveal from the study a certain level of awareness and realization of desire by vendors to adopt a system to manage customer complaint. However, the aspect of result that we consider relevant for managerial practice is the attitude of sale persons which can greatly affects complaint handling procedures within the organization. This phenomenon can have different proportional effects on procedural and interactive justice of service delivery.

The attentiveness and effort exhibited by the organization's frontline employee can play a critical role on the provision of interactional fairness. Owners must therefore seek to select most suitable candidate with outstanding interpersonal skills for positions at their restaurant. Furthermore, they must also take steps to train their staff on how to handle customers sensitivity appropriately, and where necessary deal promptly with a problem.

Finally, even though distributive justice has been argued not to have the greatest impact on complaint management (Blodgett et al., 1995), lack of compensation package for complaints may be bad for business because not every customer will ignore it. In compensating, it is important vendors ask customers to propose a "fair and reasonable" solution thereby acting as a partner in resolving the problem. Institutions in charge of consumers' protection should also be strengthened. This will help them to provide education and active legal backing for customers.

Limitations

Though Hartline and Ferrell (1996) argue that the selection of a single service industry eliminates problems associated with industry differences the focus on traditional food vending industry for the empirical analysis raise concerns about generalizability of the finding to all categories of restaurants. Replication for other categories of food vending industry would therefore be helpful.

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