

Customer Representatives' Competence Of Call Center Employees: An Exploratory Study

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ABSTRACT

The fundamental purpose of this exploratory study is to understand and analyze the leadership styles of customer representatives in call centers of online travel agencies (OTAs) through content analysis. The sample consists of 895 customer responses about the services of these online agencies. The theoretical background of the study focuses on the servant leadership styles of customer representatives to see how they can handle tough situations with the customers and how the customers respond to the level of services. The findings reveal valuable hints and important perspectives of customers for the leadership styles of customer representatives. The emphasized points are the reservation problems, lack of problem-solving, delivery of wrong information to the customers, focus on sales rather than customer satisfaction, low level of institutionalism perspective of customer representatives, and lack of interest after the sales. The study enlightens the leadership styles of customer representatives in call centers of online agencies for the use of researchers and practitioners.

1. Introduction

Since the customer representatives represent their firms and the customers (Celik, 2017), and are the service providers for thousands of customers to serve professionally and satisfactorily, it is critical to show their servant leadership skills in their communications throughout the service delivery to customers and persuasion of customers to help them make an excellent decision in their service purchases. Therefore, two questions are vital to understanding the main aim of this research. 1. How much does "servant leadership style" appear for the customer representatives to provide a satisfactory service for the customers? 2. In considering the representatives' leadership styles, how do the customers react to the delivery of services offered by the customer representatives in call centers of online travel agencies?

The theoretical aspect of the study lies under the assumption that the customer representatives serve the customers to satisfy their needs and create memorable experiences in the minds of the

customers, and not just focus on sales. Servant leadership theory is investigated across a variety of contexts and themes (Parris & Peachey, 2013; Babakus et al., 2010). According to Spears (2010), servant leadership seeks to involve others in decision making, is strongly based on ethical and caring behavior, and enhances the growth of workers while improving the caring and quality of organizational life. According to the study of Russell and Stone (2002), there are nine characteristics of servant leaders; Vision, honesty, integrity, trust, service, modeling, pioneering, appreciation of others, and empowerment. According to Spears (2010), the characteristics of servant leadership are listening, empathy, healing, awareness, persuasion, conceptualization, foresight, stewardship, commitment to the growth of people, and building community. Therefore, key leadership attributes of the customer representatives in call centers of online agencies play an important role in affecting the purchasing decisions of customers. It is also important to know how the customer representatives direct customers

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to make great decisions about purchasing a service and how they help the customers in a way to make them excited and satisfied with their final purchase.

In literature, there are several studies related to the competencies of employees in call centers (Kisi, 2016), discussions about online travel agency leaders based on market share (Dutta et al., 2017), being a leader in online travel industry (Sirohi, 2018), and the investigation of frontline employees and the supervisor leadership styles (Boukis et al., 2020; Bartram & Casimir, 2007), and different leadership styles playing a diverse role in call centers (Muthuveloo et al., 2014; Ruggieri & Abbate, 2013), there is still a literature gap about the use of servant leadership style of customer representatives in online travel agencies while serving the customers, which also makes this exploratory study unique. Therefore, from the leadership perspective, it is important to know the leadership attributes of these representatives, what type of complaints occur for them, how they solve the customer problems efficiently and effectively and satisfy their needs with an excellent service, and how the customers respond to the offered services.

The first section after the introduction of the study discusses the topic of customer representatives in call centers and their leadership styles, the sample, and method. The second section shows the main findings along with the critiques of customers for the customer representatives' services and leadership attributes. The third section is the results, conclusion, and recommendations for future studies.

2. Customer Representatives

Today, the most effective tool that the organizations use to solve customer problems related to products and services, and stay connected with the customers is the call centers that serve the customers all day long but while performing their jobs, their motivation, morale, dedication to work, and psychological condition is important (Agras & Emre, 2018) as well as strong leader-member interaction that affects the customer-focus positively (Gurer & Bozaci, 2019). However, working in shifts with high agent turnover (Naor & Coman, 2017), the stressful job environment in call centers can make it difficult to boost the employees' performance (Wallece et al., 2000; Taylor & Peter, 1999). Therefore, customer representatives who represent their firms and serve thousands of customers and their perspectives towards serving the customers are

important. It is critical for them to present their leadership attributes in their communication and convincing of customers to help them decide in their final purchases.

According to Onat, when the customer shows his/her satisfaction, it is a plus for the call center (Onat, 2014) that ends up with positive feedback for the organization and the representatives. Concerning the study of Zhou et al. (2018), when the service quality is high, the customers are more satisfied and become more loyal than before. Once the representatives gain the confidence of customers and make them believe that the organization is reliable, and will cover for them when they are in need, the customers will be ready to pay the organization in exchange for future service (De la Croix de Castries, 2017).

On the other hand, the ones who want to work in call centers as customer representatives should possess important attributes such as understanding others with empathy, expressing yourself clearly, being patient and positive, having the ability to convince people, managing time and stress, and focusing on results (Kisi, 2016). According to the study of Agras and Emre (2018), to improve the conditions of employees in call centers, there are key factors such as reorganizing work hours, paying attention to personal needs, strengthening communication and cooperation, and the feeling of commitment to the organization.

The quality of service the employees provide is important and this occurs when employees are engaged and connected employees provide excellent customer service and unique experience (Subramanian, 2018). The defining characteristic of servant leadership is its focus on benignant or excellent service to other people (Robinson, 2018; Sun, 2013; Berry et al., 1994). Based on the key characteristics of servant leadership (Boukis et al., 2020; Spears, 2010), we believe that the level of caring behavior will set the standards for future possible transactions between the customers and the online agencies. Servant leadership studies have supported positive influences of servant leadership on individuals' job satisfaction in various organizations (Chu, 2008) but the question is whether this satisfaction has a relationship with how the customer representatives perform their jobs efficiently and effectively, especially in call centers, and how they fulfill the needs of the customers.

3. Sample and Method

The research sample consists of 895 responses from travelers who have taken services from online travel agencies and make a critique about the customer representatives for their experiences in a mainstream website “sikayetvar.com” between January 2019 and January 2020. Concerning the online visitors for the website, as of 01 January 2020, the number of members on the website is 4.560.769, the number of visitors for the last 30 days on the website is 14.801.403, and the total complaints about the online services are 8.785.554.

Among the total complaints about the online services of several industries, 895 visitor comments for the services of online travel agencies are gathered and transferred from the website to a data-sheet in which the content analysis of the text takes place in detail. Along with the content analysis of the data, frequency analysis for customer representative-related expressions, problematic topics for the customer representatives, and percentage distributions of the main findings are presented briefly. The types of problems that the customers encounter with the customer representatives are categorized according to the frequencies of them and their similarities. The study pays attention to the frequently-used comments related to the service delivery of online travel agencies and the evaluation of cases one by one to distinguish their types.

4. Findings

Frequencies of Customer-Related Expressions

Table 1 presents the customer-related expressions along with their frequencies and percentage distributions. The top three expressions are the customer, customer representative, and customer services respectively. Last but not least, the lowest frequency is the call centers’ weak customer communication.

Table 1: Frequencies of customer-related expressions

Expressions	Frequencies	Percentage
Customer	110	52.9
Customer representative	29	13.9
Customer services	20	9.61
Customer representatives not returning phone calls	18	8.65
Call center customer representatives	16	7.69
Weak customer communication	15	7.21
Total:	208	100

Source: Authors

Customers’ Problematic Issues for Customer Representatives

Table 2 emphasizes the customers’ fundamental problems for the customer representatives along with the frequencies and percentage distributions. The top three topics are the reservation problems, focusing on not problem-solving, and the delivery of wrong information to the customers respectively. The lowest frequencies are the missing information, lack of representatives’ authority to solve customer problems, weak communication with the customers, and the delivery of wrong discount/campaign information.

Table 2: Customers’ problematic topics for customer representatives

Expressions	Frequencies	Percentage
Representatives are not helpful in reservation problems	92	30.4
The main focus is not on problem-solving	38	12.5
Providing wrong information to the customers	30	9.93
Focus on sales first rather than customer satisfaction	29	9.60
Low level of institutionalism perspective of representatives	22	7.28
Lack of interest after the sales	21	6.95
Not returning phone calls at all	18	5.96
Providing different price information than on the website	17	5.62
Disrespectful and not professional	13	4.30
Not providing all the information (missing information)	8	2.64
Representatives not having the authority to solve problems	7	2.31
Weak communication with the customers	4	1.32
Providing wrong discount/campaign information	3	0.99
Total:	302	100

Source: Authors

5. Results and Discussion

The customer-related expressions reveal that the customer is the core part of an online transaction or service. The connection between the customer representatives and the customer is important in terms of providing excellent services to satisfy the needs of customers satisfactorily. For instance, a customer emphasizes that “The reason I prefer online travel agencies is that if I have a service problem, I can expect to get immediate help from the customer representatives of the travel agency”.

According to the customer comments, one of the key problematic issues is the reservation problem through the online travel agency and how the service takes place with the direction of the customer representative. The main problematic areas in general are the reservation issues that the customers face, problem-solving situations on the phone with the representatives, delivery of wrong

information to the customers, lack of institutionalism according to the customers, lack of interest towards the customers after the sales, traffic of phone calls but no solution, lack of authority of customer representatives to solve urgent problems, weak communication between the customers and the customer representatives, and the delivery of different or wrong discount/campaign information to the customers.

Based on the comments of the customers, the reservation problem is extremely important for the customers: Here are some of the key quotes of the customers; “The customer representatives have been calling me until they sell the travel package, and then cancel my reservation without informing me. However, they organize a new tour with another name on the same date”. Another customer states that “They sold our paid-hotel reservation to another customer, told us to go to another hotel with an extra fee. They do not care about our discomfort and stress at all”. Another stressful customer comment is that “The representatives’ interest is very low. We made a reservation and paid the price but once we get to the hotel, it was occupied”. In another instance, “The representatives never respond. We make a reservation, they withdraw the money but the room is not available. Not a trustable site and service”. The comments reveal that there should be quality standards of the organization while influencing the purchase of customers. The representatives should handle the stress of the customers and their stress professionally. According to Gurer and Bozaci, stress decreases due to the mediator effect of leader-member interaction (Gurer & Bozaci, 2019). That is why the leadership skills of customer representatives along with the cooperation of team leaders and training are crucial to creating a strong bond with the customers.

In terms of problem-solving of customers, the delivery of wrong information by the customer representatives, and the subject of institutionalism, there are severe comments of customers. For instance, one customer comment is that “The representatives are not professional. They have a sales-focus mind first and do not focus on solving customer problems after the sales”. In providing wrong information, one customer comment is that “Every service has a price although we bought an all-inclusive service package. The representatives lead us in the wrong direction, provide wrong information, and cannot continue the process appropriately”. Another

comment is that “The service information on the website is not what the representatives told us. We believe that they want to make sales as fast as possible”. In the subject of institutionalism, there are several comments of customers for the organization. One essential comment is that “There is a problem in corporate governance. The processes take too long and there are wrong declarations for the delivery of services. There is the satisfaction of customers at the beginning but it disappears later”. Another key customer comment is that “The customer representatives do not take the responsibility of their actions, explain the level of services transparently, and fulfill the needs of customers”. As being the voice of the organization, the customer representatives should step up and show their leadership with the governance principles to convince the customers and offer appropriate services to satisfy them. As the study of Othman and Rahman (2014) indicates that considering the servant leadership style, the guidance of corporate leadership towards a high standard of governance practices is important.

According to the opinions of customers about the interest of representatives, there are important comments. One comment is that “The representatives show little interest in customer problems, do not listen, and cannot handle customer complaints. Empathy is necessary”. In another comment, “The customer representative shows no interest although we made a reservation, paid the price but the hotel is occupied when we get there”. With these types of incidents, the customers criticize that “The representatives never call you back even though they say they will, impossible to reach them, no refund policy at all although you are right and they make delays”. One of the reasons why the customer representatives do not call the customer back can be due to their job stress in call centers, as mentioned in the study of Isik and Hamurcu (2017) but no matter what the situation brings, they should provide the quality services professionally and satisfactorily.

The lack of authority, weak communication, and discount/campaign problems are the other issues the customers mention. According to one comment “The representatives lack the authority to solve any type of problem the customer faces”. In terms of communication, one comment is that “The representatives have a weak communication, especially in urgent situations, do not comfort the customers, and satisfy their needs although you are absolutely right about the matter”. In terms of providing discount for the services, one comment

shows the unhappiness for the service. “The customer representatives say that there is no real discount or campaign or there is a little information in certain situations but the website shows the opposite situation”.

In terms of showing the leadership styles of customer representatives; caring others, high-quality service providing, appreciation of others, listening, showing empathy, valuing customers and trustworthiness are missing throughout the communication process with the customers, which are essential ingredients in servant leadership as they are mentioned in the study of Spears (2010) from a different perspective. The customers look for excellent services along with comfort from the online travel agencies and the representatives of these agencies, and if any problem occurs, they want to believe that they can easily call the customer representatives on the phone and solve their problems satisfactorily.

The truth is without the high-quality service, trustworthiness, and empathy and understanding the concerns of the customers, paying attention to what the customers need and ask for, they will never demand service for the future, which is a huge loss for the organizations’ prestige and sales. That is why with the perspective of servant leadership, the customer representatives in call centers of online travel agencies should be well-trained and equipped with the necessary tools to satisfy the needs of the customers no matter how difficult the situation is. The love of serving the customers along with the gained leadership attributes should come first instead of paying attention to increased sales figures for the organization. Another key point is that working closely with the team leaders in the organization will boost the customer representatives’ leadership skills to handle difficult situations they come across and serve better.

6. Conclusion

The fundamental approach of this study is to understand and analyze the leadership styles of customer representatives of online travel agencies through content analysis. Along with the theoretical background of servant leadership theory, this exploratory study is one of the early studies focusing on the leadership styles of customer representatives, in this case the servant leadership, while serving the customers in call centers of online travel agencies.

Based on the results of the study, the vast majority of the customers are very sensitive towards the

level of services they get, the speed of problem-solving with the help of the customer representatives, and strong communication with the service provider whenever it is necessary to solve key obstacles such as the reservation problems and the timely arrangements. The results reveal that along with the understanding of servant leadership style, the customer representatives can serve the customers much better than before. Thus, it is critical for the customer representatives in call centers of online travel agencies to serve better and increase awareness for the delivery of services to the customers.

The study comes with a few limitations. Only a limited number of customer comments on customer representatives' services and approaches for one year period through a specific website take place in this exploratory study. For future research, other available comments for customer representatives can be investigated in the selected national or international travel organizations, other than the online services. After investigating the customer comments on customer representatives' level of services and their leadership styles, the categorization of customer problems and the use of leadership attributes in different situations can be investigated.

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