



Investigation of Language and Attitudes on the Phrase "*The Customer is Always Right*" A Motto Endorsed by Employers to Employees in the Public Sphere

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Abstract

In both the public and private employment sectors, locally and globally, the slogan "The customer is always right" has achieved a prominent position in service delivery, influencing interactions between staff and clients. Consequently, this phrase has the potential to undermine workers' credibility and may negatively impact their reputation when providing customer assistance. This dynamic often leads to overlooked errors stemming from the assertion that "the customer is always right." Therefore, this article examines employees' perspectives on this slogan. It aims to thoroughly investigate any inequalities and instances of workplace sabotage that this phrase may inadvertently promote. An in-depth examination of disparities and negative sentiments among staff is warranted. Additionally, this article aims to employ an exploratory research methodology as a suitable framework to address the challenges that employees encounter in their daily interactions with customers. Ultimately, the multimodal theory will serve as the foundation for this article, guiding the development of responses to the difficulties personnel encounter. A review of related studies and their presentation will enhance this article, with the contributions to be published in the banking sector newsletter. Finally, findings advocating for equality will also be disseminated to bank management personnel and translated into nearly all 12 official languages of the nation.

Keywords

customer is always right, inequality, banking sector, customers, personnel, language availability

INTRODUCTION AND BACKGROUND

The phrase "the customer is always right" was coined by Marshall Field in 1905. This notion has fostered a consumer-centric approach in public environments. Consequently, this challenge and methodology may exhibit biases. Public service employees are expected by their employers to prioritize the belief that the customer is always right. While this expectation can lead to employee dissatisfaction, particularly in the banking sector, it is crucial to explore the underlying issues. This article aims to reveal and understand the realities faced by employees, who often suppress their feelings and genuine experiences to uphold the "customer is always right" ideology. Furthermore, we seek to determine whether employees can adhere to the established standard of "the customer is always right" to ensure customer satisfaction while complying with the banking industry's rules and regulations.

Therefore, in response to this challenge, the main objectives will be addressed:

- To explore the equity between customers and employees in banking institutions in relation to the slogan "the customer is always right."
- To analyse the linguistic fairness or accessibility employed by both customers and employees in the context of the slogan "the customer is always right."

In almost every industry that caters to the public, the adage "the customer is always right" plays a significant role in defining customer rights while often undermining employees' rights. Ultimately, these employees are expected to serve their communities with pride and steadfast enthusiasm, fulfilling their duties effectively. However, in executing this assigned task, there is a noticeable absence of a consistently appropriate linguistic approach from customers towards employees (Gobodwana, 2025).

Further elaboration, as discussed by Boyd (1997), posits that contemporary business theory asserts a singular purpose for a business: to serve the customer. This principle equally applies to divisions within an organization, leading to the term "internal customer." If you fail to satisfy your customers, they will leave your business, and in their absence, the business risks collapse. Consequently, the business is necessitated to seek competitive partners or customers to ensure its continued operation and viability.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The business principle "the customer is always right," as articulated by Dalpes (2024), is frequently misinterpreted; however, it can be advantageous when applied appropriately. Dalpes (2024) underscores the significance of product experience, which often serves as a pivotal factor for many customers. Consequently, terms such as "customer obsession," "customer centricity," and "customer intimacy" have gained traction in various organizations. Like other industries, the banking sector aligns with Dalpe's (2024) sentiments, asserting that customer satisfaction must be central to business operations and that employees should strive to be customer obsessed. When Dalpes (2024) points out that the notion of "the customer is always right" is frequently misconstrued, he highlights how this concept can conflict with company policies and employee limitations, as customers may leverage it to compel employees to fulfil their requests regardless of the implications.

Complaints made by customers

Bruynooghe (2014) posits that customers' impressions regarding complaints stem from a negative confirmation of their purchase expectations. Folkes (1984) notes that consumers are more inclined to voice complaints when the issue arises from an external source, such as a company error or a product defect. Conversely, when the fault is perceived to be internal, attributed to the consumer's handling of the product, the likelihood of complaints diminishes. Additionally, this article explores the language customers use when addressing their grievances to employees.

Maintaining a positive business image is crucial for sustainability and product growth. However, when customers post negative reviews in public forums, such as social media platforms, the feedback can severely damage a business. Furthermore, customers have numerous avenues to undermine a business due to a single failure to adhere to best practices. Consequently, business managers and officials foster strong relationships and advocate for the slogan "the customer is always right."

Employee Experience and Organisational Dynamics

Empirical studies show that employees often interpret "*the customer is always right*" as managerial support for customer demands, even when those demands are unreasonable or conflict with policy (Mattila & Mount, 2003). This creates role conflict and emotional labour, requiring employees to manage their own feelings to present a service-oriented façade (Hochschild, 1983). The cumulative effect of these demands has been linked to burnout and reduced job satisfaction (Brotheridge & Lee, 2003), particularly in frontline roles such as banking, retail, and hospitality.

Language Attitude and Use in the Establishments

Gobodwana (2025:35) asserts that the relationship between language and society, especially the inequalities among African indigenous languages, has received considerable focus in scholarly research. Studies have revealed the difficulties encountered by these languages, such as the isiXhosa dialects in South Africa, in terms of language standardization and societal standing. For instance, research by Makoni (2007) showed that the dominance of English and other colonial languages in Africa has led to the marginalization and neglect of indigenous languages, including isiXhosa dialects, resulting in a decline in cultural heritage and identity.

Furthermore, empirical studies, including those by Ngcobo (2015), have illustrated that the emergence of technology and social media has accelerated the rapid evolution of language, including isiXhosa, giving rise to new dialects and variations. This transformation has further complicated efforts toward language standardization and orthography development, presenting challenges for linguists and educators striving to create a unified standard for isiXhosa. These insights emphasize the complex relationship between language and society, underscoring the need to address issues of language inequality and standardization in African indigenous languages, particularly isiXhosa dialects.

METHODS AND DESIGN

In this article, we have chosen to employ a qualitative methodology throughout. This narrative literature review has assessed and compiled data from various sources to discuss the concept of "the customer is always right." Furthermore, Myburgh (2015) emphasizes the benefits of the qualitative methodological approach, which allows the researcher to explore the subject matter freely while safeguarding the confidentiality of the information. The benefit of selecting or engaging in qualitative research aligns with my viewpoint on research ontology (De Vos et al., 2011, p. 306).

As noted in the literature, the initial approach is founded on the belief that reality should be viewed objectively as an external entity 'out there,' necessitating that the researcher adopts a detached, unbiased position when analysing it. Although researchers may be employed by banks, the perspective offered by this article has facilitated a deeper comprehension of the viewpoints and revealed what is obscured by the current body of knowledge. Additionally, Babbie and Mouton (2001, 53) contend that a qualitative research methodology entails examining human behavior from an insider's perspective. Consequently, this methodology is considered a naturalistic approach to social inquiry. In this discussion, this article has analysed and explored the widely recognized business phrase "The Customer is Always Right," which employers in the public sector promote to employees to maintain business profitability.

DISCUSSION AND ANALYSIS

The findings of this article report on the themes extracted from the objectives of this article. The adopted analysis focuses on secondary data collection, as in this article, we analyzed fewer responses from various sources.

Equity between customers and employees in banking institutions in relation to the slogan "the customer is always right."

Banks are expected to serve communities and societies on a larger scale, both physically and virtually. This analysis clearly indicates that customers express their satisfaction and dissatisfaction regarding the services provided to them. However, if employees are unable to step aside, lose themselves in enhancing solutions, and navigate through challenges, we will inevitably diminish morale at every turn. When management conveys the notion that customers are infallible, it places frontline workers in a challenging predicament. Being informed that the customer will always prevail, regardless of the circumstances, can be profoundly frustrating and demoralizing for a team.

Furthermore, it is often stated that customers can be unreasonable or impolite, necessitating that businesses protect their employees from such behavior. At times, an irate customer may act unreasonably, compelling the employee to remain silent and submissive, regardless of the circumstances, to uphold the nation's and the company's reputations. Employees may encounter abusive customers but are often expected to internalize their experiences. No individual should have to endure blatant humiliation or threats. In such instances, it is imperative for management to provide support to their teams. If employees are persistently subjected to customer mistreatment without the organization's backing, it can lead to a decline in morale. This decline can significantly impact team morale, resulting in high employee turnover and a negative customer experience.

In subsequent submissions, it is evident that businesses expect the initial objective to be fostering exceptional customer service. Employees interpret this expectation as requiring emotional labour, which involves the effort to suppress or regulate one's own emotions to facilitate pleasant interactions, regardless of internal responses. This emotional labour, particularly when combined with discourteous customer behaviour, can lead to burnout, persistent rumination, and, in severe cases, retaliatory intentions. Consequently, the phrase encapsulates not only a customer-centric approach but also a psychological obligation for employees to handle negative interactions without expressing dissatisfaction.

As a result, contemporary employee understanding of the phrase "the customer is always right" has shifted. Many employees and researchers alike now interpret it not as literal truth but as service-oriented professional conduct, prioritizing the satisfaction of reasonable customer needs while upholding respectful boundaries and ensuring employee well-being. Organizations that adapt policies to protect employees from abusive customer behaviour tend to foster better morale and service quality, indicating a more balanced interpretation of the phrase within workplace culture.

Linguistic fairness or accessibility is employed by both customers and employees in the context of the slogan "the customer is always right."

The investigation into the notion that "the customer is always right" presents several challenges, particularly because of the ambiguous language used by both customers and employees during interactions. The initial hurdle is the subjective nature of the concept as it pertains to service and customer issue resolution, given differing interpretations among employees and customers alike. While some view it as a principle rooted in respect and a commitment to fulfilling customer needs, others perceive it as impractical, wilfully overlooking the associated costs, and detrimental to employees' health and well-being. This disparity complicates the establishment of a consistent experience and the extraction of meaningful insights. Furthermore, employees may hesitate to express genuine opinions regarding customer service philosophies and policies, particularly in settings where management anticipates them to uphold and praise this ideology.

Employees may suppress their responses due to fears of criticism or potential job-related consequences. Ultimately, linking employee beliefs about 'the customer is always right' directly to customer satisfaction poses numerous challenges. Customer satisfaction can be influenced by various factors, such as service duration, product quality perception, pricing strategies, appropriate language use, and technology, which complicates a direct correlation with this philosophy. Language barriers can arise, particularly when an employee interacts with a client who has limited language proficiency. Furthermore, the context of the customer-employee linguistic interaction must be considered to ensure the message is clearly conveyed when addressing the customer's issues.

Customer satisfaction is influenced by banks' operational practices and the collaborative efforts of all parties involved. The banking sector is intricate, encompassing numerous processes that impact customers, such as account openings, loan approvals, addressing inquiries, and ensuring transaction security. When these processes are executed effectively, transparently, and with a customer-first focus, they foster trust in the bank and encourage customer loyalty.

All stakeholders, including employees, management, and regulators, play a crucial role in ensuring that the bank adheres to regulations and continuously improves its services. Customer-facing personnel address inquiries and concerns daily, while the organization prioritizes customer satisfaction as a key objective.

Language is present in various aspects of engagement, including school, home, playtime, business, advertising, and agriculture. If language is misinterpreted, it can render the sector unpleasant, misconstrued, and confusing. Nevertheless, clear communication between customers and employees eliminates barriers and challenges. Language plays a crucial role across all environments, as it facilitates communication between bankers and customers. Consequently, if the slogan "the customer is always right" is effectively communicated, misunderstandings will be minimized.

CONCLUSIONS

In conclusion, fostering a solid understanding between customers and employees is achieved through the policies that govern each business, which promote fairness and understanding in their interactions. Organizational culture and policies are crucial to ensuring customer satisfaction, as they influence employee behavior, decision-making, and the prioritization of customer needs. A robust customer-centric culture has been shown to directly enhance satisfaction by motivating employees to act proactively, exhibit empathy, and tailor service delivery (Homburg, Jozić & Kuehnl, 2017).

When organizational values emphasize service excellence and a customer-centric approach, employees are more inclined to engage in behaviours that surpass expectations and foster positive customer experiences (Klaus & Maklan, 2016). At the policy level, well-defined service standards, training protocols, and complaint resolution procedures contribute to consistent service quality, thereby minimizing dissatisfaction stemming from variability in service interactions (Soto-Acosta, Popa & Martinez-Conesa, 2018). Moreover, policies that empower frontline employees enhance their capacity to address issues promptly, thereby bolstering customer trust and perceived value (Kuo & Chen, 2019). Recent studies further indicate that organizational cultures that promote innovation and ongoing improvement enable firms to adapt to evolving customer expectations, thus maintaining high levels of satisfaction over time (Wirtz & Zeithaml, 2018).

Furthermore, banking policies are crafted to ensure uniformity, uphold security, and guarantee regulatory compliance; however, they can also act as obstacles to customer satisfaction. For instance, in numerous banking scenarios, stringent loan approval policies, protracted bureaucratic processes, and somewhat rigid fees collectively lead customers to perceive banks as unyielding. The existence of policies that restrict frontline employees' decision-making authority implies that even straightforward customer inquiries may require escalation to higher management, resulting in delays and diminished customer satisfaction.

Additionally, customer service policies and procedures often prioritize regulatory compliance over smooth customer journeys, leading to interactions that are both cumbersome and impersonal. Challenges posed by some of these policies may include limited operating hours, inadequate support for customers in the digital space, and products such as intricate complaint-resolution processes tied to customer-access policies, which discourage customers from engaging with services that should foster trust and enhance customer satisfaction.

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