
Standardisation of Logistics Customer Service

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Abstract:

Purpose: This paper is devoted to the standardisation of customer service in the logistics services market. Its first part focuses on various aspects of defining and optimising buyer service. Next, the focus turns to the benefits and barriers of service standardisation, and at the end of the text, the focus turns to logistics buyer service, understood as the ability of a company's logistics system to meet customer expectations in such categories as lead time, certainty and security of transactions, communication with the customer, and efficiency and convenience of service. The authors have made a comprehensive analysis of customer service as a business process. They have focused on the ways in which customer service is perceived and the factors determining its level. They then evaluated the advantages of standardising logistics service, without ignoring the limitations of implementing this process.

Design/Methodology/Approach: The paper uses the method of descriptive characteristics of market phenomena and processes. The professional literature on customer service standardisation was comprehensively searched.

Findings: The results of the analyses are of both cognitive and pragmatic value, especially in the context of undertaking work towards the development and implementation of a standardised logistics strategy for customer service.

Originality/Value: Standardisation of the customer service process allows for a quicker response to customer preferences, and also makes it possible to design the process in such a way that it has a positive impact on the company's operations and becomes a source of its competitive advantage. Among the many benefits of standardising logistics customer service are increased customer satisfaction, lower staff management costs and a systematic drive to improve the quality of customer service.

Keywords: Standardisation, customer service, logistics service.

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1. Introduction

Customer service is not understood in an unambiguous way and there are many definitions of it. This is a consequence of, among other things, a different perception of service by manufacturers, suppliers, retailers and customers. Furthermore, customer service is perceived differently by experts in marketing, trade and logistics. Different approaches to understanding customer service methods and strategies are also a result of the industry-specific nature of markets and the large diversity of forms of company activity in these markets.

Despite differences in interpreting the described concept, the common element of all definitions is the relationship between the vendor and the customer during the implementation of the purchase or sales process. The paramount goal of professional customer service is full customer satisfaction and good long-term relationships with suppliers and customers.

Customer service is a concept that has been interpreted by many prominent theoreticians and practitioners, making it difficult to give the most accurate definition. Many definitions include the theme of linking all operations and activities that bind the producer or vendor to the recipients of its goods or services. For example, the definition of customer service proposed by the American businessman Roland Ballou states that it is a number of interconnected logistics activities that determine customer satisfaction when purchasing a product or service (Kawecka-Endler and Marczevska-Kuzma, 2012). Customer service therefore encompasses all areas of supplier-buyer contact and can be understood as a set of activities involving both the vendor and the customer or all spheres of supplier-buyer contact involving both intangible and tangible elements (Szulce *et al.*, 2012).

Customer service, whatever it may be, comes directly from the person providing it, not from the company for which they work. It encompasses activities that absorb every area of the business, forming a sequence of activities that aim to sell products or services (Krzepicka, 2014). In short, the attributes of customer service should be care and concern. Professional buyer service is the constant striving to satisfy the needs and expectations of customers so that their contacts with the company are a pleasure.

Every customer perceives a company through the level of customer service and pays great attention to how they are treated by direct service employees such as sales staff, couriers, service technicians, cashiers, complaint handlers, etc. A very important role in this respect is played by salespeople's empathy, i.e., the ability to see reality from the customer's perspective and to genuinely empathise with the customer's expectations. However, preserving traditional politeness in relations with other people is not sufficient and the only condition for considering customer service as professional.

According to Kempny (2001) customer service can be defined in three different ways. The first is to treat it as a certain system of solutions aimed at guaranteeing customer satisfaction from the time the order is placed until the product is collected (Harasim, 2018). The second is to define customer service as an optimum solution to ensure the correct relationship between the time an order is made and the time the customer receives the product. The third approach is the broadest and consists in viewing customer service through the prism of the management philosophy of a given organisation (Kempny, 2001), where the whole company is responsible for the quality of customer service in all areas of functioning.

The aim of this paper is to analyse the possibilities of standardising customer service in the logistics service industry and the advantages and barriers of implementing this process.

2. Standardisation of Customer Service

Standards in the organisation are developed and implemented as a result of the development of the company or because of the ineffectiveness of existing solutions, which forces the introduction of specific changes. Service standards are implemented in two ways. As a rule, this is a top-down action, when the orientation to above-average customer service is inscribed in the mission, philosophy, objectives and strategy of the company. Sometimes, however, it is a bottom-up action of an operational nature, undertaken on the basis of previous experience in cooperation with customers.

The standardisation process consists of concretising and unifying the rules that apply in a given area of the company's operation. Its exemplification is a kind of standardisation process, i.e. the establishment and implementation of new rules and procedures, necessary for the functioning of individual organisational structures in a company. The objectives of standardisation are primarily:

- unification of services, products, tools and methods so that they are maintained regardless of where and when individual activities are carried out,
- optimisation of costs by increasing the efficiency of individual activities,
- creation of action patterns that can be analysed and evaluated,
- standardisation of marketing programmes (Sagan, 2010);
- elimination of errors and omissions.

In the case of customer service standardisation, it is the implementation of specific attitudes, behaviours, practices and tools, the display of which by dedicated employees combines customer satisfaction with the company's business objectives in the best possible way (Szlagowska, 2017). Their implementation and standardisation (e.g., in the case of subsidiaries, branches or retail chains or

franchises) allows for efficient service and the provision of added value to the customer, e.g. in the form of efficient communication.

Standardisation is a key element of customer service process management (Strojny, 2008). It consists of implementing certain standards of dealing with customers, which concern both logistics and interpersonal service elements. Customer service standards can be divided into interpersonal service - the so-called soft standards, which relate to the behaviour of people involved in the process, such as the ability to negotiate or knowledge of the rules of non-verbal communication, as well as logistics service - the so-called hard standards related to the processes of order fulfilment, such as order processing time.

In reality, interpersonal service is much more difficult to fully realise, as it involves people from different organisational departments within a company. People from marketing, logistics, sales, order processing or debt collection, among others, are involved in the customer service process. The standardisation process requires all employees to behave in the same way when performing a given activity. The most important document in the standardisation process is the "Service Standards Book", which should include all current standards and procedures in force in a given company (Strojny, 2011).

A book of service standards makes it easier to manage sales staff, as it sets the same requirements, and makes it easier to train new employees, thanks to the clear requirements that are set for them. Standardisation also has an impact on lower human resources management costs, as it makes it possible to identify skills gaps in individual employees and to reduce them effectively.

The PWN dictionary of Polish language defines standardisation as the introduction of uniform standards. Thus, if we relate it to customer service, it means the introduction of the same standard of conduct in contacts with customers in the whole company. A company's customer service standards should have the following attributes:

- relevance - relating standards realistically to customer requirements and preferences;
- specificity - every direct service worker should know the specific expectations of their job and what to do, when, how and where;
- versatility - applicability in a maximum number of cases;
- measurability - the principle that the degree to which standards are achieved can be assessed (Smyk, 2015);
- modifiability - each employee should have the right to participate in setting and revising the required customer service standards;
- transparency - the customer service requirements of a particular position should be clearly defined and uniformly enforced on all staff.

Standard is not only systematised rules and guidelines that set the framework for an employee's behaviour during customer contact. Standard is also non-service elements, such as the visualisation of the service desk or the employee's appearance, whose unified functioning is key to building a coherent image of the organisation (Delebis *et al.*, 2015).

The larger the organisation and thus the number of employees who have direct contact with the buyer, the more difficult it will be to provide high-quality universal service without standardisation measures. Therefore, customer service standards are a necessity. Above all, they make it possible to achieve repeatable, desired behaviour and to create appropriate habits, which will result in loyal, returning customers. Service standards can range from simple schemes to complex algorithms and scenarios related to responding to the behaviour of a specific customer. They may include specific staff behaviours and may also give service staff much more freedom to personalise their approach to the customer.

The introduction of a specific service concept results in the need to create and implement customer service standards. They should be clear and understandable, but also should extend to all aspects of the relationship with the customer - starting with the establishment of communication in the pre-transaction phase, through the effective execution of the order in the transaction phase, to after-sales service as a post-transaction element (Kramarz, 2014). Interactions established with the customer can be divided into three types:

- physical contacts - all the customer's experiences with the tangible elements of the company, e.g. buildings, merchandise, furnishings; the customer then evaluates the cleanliness, brightness, the way the commercial unit is organised and its decoration (elements of the merchandising strategy) and the atmosphere inside,
- transactional contacts - related to systems that enable transactions, e.g. intuitive website, card payment options, delivery options, mobile apps with loyalty programmes and others,
- interactive contacts, which include all contacts with staff. The customer pays attention to staff involvement, level of care and support, knowledge and experience, and other elements such as tone of voice, smile, friendliness (Horovitz, 2006).

Many companies choose to use the services of standardisation and certification bodies, which provide comprehensive services in this area - from analysing the current situation to implementing and evaluating new standards. The elements of customer service standards and the sales areas they generally address are:

- physical appearance, behaviour of the employee: image and organisational standard;

- organisation of the space, design of the workplace;
- the employee's attitude towards the customer, greeting and saying goodbye;
- the communication styles used, depending on the type of customer and their needs (face-to-face, telephone or e-mail);
- queue management and handling of newly arriving customers (www.biostat.com).

An important element of the standardisation process is internal employee training and ongoing analysis of the effectiveness of the implemented standards. The trainings make it possible to reliably and accurately convey to the employees the most important information and assumptions about the applied standards, indicate the methods of their implementation, and at the same time allow to collect opinions and suggestions about the standardised norms from people who work with them on a daily basis.

Among the many standards of customer service, issues concerning such spheres of the company's activity as the following need to be clarified and communicated by managers to service personnel:

- availability of goods and services,
- guaranteeing the customer that they are buying an undamaged, working product;
- possibility of returns or exchanges;
- access to information about the product, its price, its features (Olhager, 2012);
- after-sales services (warranty, assembly, transport, etc.) (Ciechomski, 2010);
- loyalty programmes (e.g., collecting points for purchases, mobile applications);
- interpersonal service (e.g., speaking the language of benefit, smiling, kindness),
- rules for the recommendation by staff of products and services currently being promoted;
- uniformed staff working clothing;
- unified design of sales points;
- a standardised product and service offer in all outlets of a given network.

Standardisation provides many benefits for companies. These include increased customer satisfaction, better results and lower personnel management costs, as well as the constant desire to improve customer service skills. On the other hand, the disadvantages of standardisation mainly concern the financial sphere. These include e.g., the high financial investments needed to start the standardisation process, the high costs of updating already implemented standards, which are a consequence of constant changes in a turbulent environment. The main advantages as well as

barriers and disadvantages of the customer service standardisation process are listed below.

Table 1. *Advantages and barriers of the customer service standardisation process*

Advantages of standardising customer service	Barriers and disadvantages of standardisation
Balancing the quality of customer service over time and space.	The real success of service standardisation depends on the knowledge, skills and motivation of employees. The higher the level of competence and commitment of employees, the easier the process of implementing uniform standards is.
Creating a consistent corporate image, regardless of when and by whom customers are served.	The complexity of the service process - in a large corporation offering a wide and deep range of goods and services, the standardisation process will be much more complex.
Possibility of reducing staff management costs, ease of introducing new employees into the workforce.	Size of the market served - the larger the number of people involved in the customer service process, the more difficult it will be to standardise service.
Facilitating the identification of competence gaps in individual employees and thus implementing more effective training.	The need to constantly monitor the quality of customer service and the fulfilment of related standards.
A significant increase in customer satisfaction with the efficiency of service, and thus greater buyer loyalty.	The need to implement continuous marketing research in order to diagnose buyers' satisfaction with meeting customer service standards.

Source: Own study.

Standardisation of the customer service process allows for a more rapid response to customers' expectations towards the company, but also makes it possible to design the process in such a way that it has a positive impact on the company's operations, e.g. by introducing additional measures to build customer loyalty, such as newsletters or systems of reductions and discounts.

3. Logistics Customer Service

When describing logistics customer service, it is reasonable to distinguish between the terms "customer service" and "logistics customer service". The former is broader, as it covers all areas of activity aimed at satisfying customers' needs. The second term, on the other hand, refers to logistics forms of activity that result from the execution of specific logistics processes (Smyk, 2014). The role of logistics service is to integrate logistics undertakings that are performed within the logistics system of a given company, as well as cooperating entities that form a supply network.

In turn, in the operational dimension, logistics service determines the need for specific standards and the use of technologies that will enable flows of both physical and informational nature. A broad spectrum of several definitions of logistics customer service is included in the work "Logistics customer service in e-commerce" (Majchrzak-Lepczyk, 2020).

Logistics customer service is a set of activities that ensure the maintenance of a satisfactory relationship between the vendor and the buyer. Engaging with customers should be prioritised (Silvester and Ahmed, 2010). This issue is very important in the operation of any company, because it directly affects the number of customers and their satisfaction level, and thus also the profitability of the company.

A customer service strategy from a logistics point of view is therefore oriented towards optimisation, as well as improving the profitability of customers. Service standards should be a compromise between customer requirements and customer value. It is therefore necessary to segment customers in terms of their profitability, taking into account the cost of customer service and its importance to customers. This makes it possible to:

- identify actions aimed at increasing customer profitability,
- avoid the service being provided at too low or too high a level,
- conduct negotiations taking into account not only the scale of operations, but above all their profitability (Baraniecka, 2011).

In the process of logistics service, the quality of provided services is of key importance. A high level of customer service significantly affects the effectiveness and efficiency of actions taken to retain customers. In this context, companies competing only with prices and features of the offered products put themselves a priori at a disadvantage (Dyczkowska, 2015).

In logistics, customer service is defined as the ability of the logistics system to meet customer expectations in terms of time, reliability, communication and convenience. In other words, this concept should be understood as a specific approach to forming relationships as well as a set of values in the company, to which integrated marketing processes should be subordinated. In professionally implemented logistics customer service, the expectations and needs of buyers are of paramount importance to the service company. Flexibility in customer service means the ability of the logistics system to respond efficiently to non-standard orders (Baker, 2006).

Logistics service can be understood and diagnosed as:

- defined activity - in this perspective, service is seen as a set of individual activities performed to satisfy customer needs. These are activities related to the delivery, which need to be performed during the execution of the order (e.g., financial service, preparation of invoices, inventory management, issuing goods and their shipping) (Dobrzyński, 2007).
- level of offered customer service - these are standards of performed service elements. In this instance, we link customer service to compliance with standards for delivery time, completeness, timeliness, stock availability, damage percentage, etc.

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- management philosophy - in this perspective the whole company in all its areas is responsible for customer service. The basis of this approach is comprehensive knowledge of customer preferences and needs and lasting relationships built on interactions (Kadlubek, 2011).

Logistics customer service involves planning, organising, implementing and controlling individual processes - from order placement to delivery. It should guarantee efficient and effective realisation of physical, informational and financial flows in order to positively influence customer satisfaction. The premises cited above allow us to define logistics customer service as the ability and skill to meet expectations in terms of time and place of delivery, reliability, communication and convenience.

Customer service in logistics is often associated with activities related to the delivery of goods, but the quality of service depends on the actions taken within the entire supply chain (Długosz, 2010). Logistics customer service is service that is intended to enable the customer to purchase a given good at the right place and time, and the measure of this process is the ability to fulfil the order from current reserves.

It is the customer and the satisfaction provided to them that contribute to a company's success and gain an advantage over its competitors. In the modern view of logistics service, it is emphasised that it is not the products and services on offer by companies that are the source of their profit, but the customers who buy them. Thus, providing value to the customer has become the mission of many companies, and this has also contributed to building long-term partnerships.

In conducting business, it is very important to provide customers with such values that realistically and effectively affect their loyalty to a given supplier. Customer value is the surplus of the customer's subjectively perceived benefits over the subjectively perceived costs associated with the purchase and use of a given product (Dobiegala-Korona, 2015). Benefits are understood as satisfying the needs of the buyer, while costs are time spent on the purchase, financial resources allocated for this purpose, as well as the wear and tear of the purchased product.

Thus, the value for the customer is a kind of investment, which for the company means financial benefits and building a positive image of the vendor in the perception of the buyer. The most important values delivered to the customer include:

- value of the product form (ease of use, visual and functional value of the goods);
- value of the product's function (satisfying needs and meeting expectations);
- value of the time and place of purchase (offer availability);
- value of ownership (purchase credit, deferred payments);

- security value (trust, brand reputation);
- value of communication and education (informing and educating customers);
- value of experience (building positive experiences, customer loyalty);
- value of cooperation (customisation and personalisation of the offer - the possibility for the customer to co-create value as a result of their opinions and the company's readiness to make changes based on them).

4. Conclusion

Perfecting service quality in terms of the value delivered to customers consists not only of striving to meet current customer requirements, but also of accurately anticipating and exceeding them (Sokol *et al.*, 2021). It is worth mentioning at this point that logistics and marketing should be treated as integral elements of creating value for the buyer, generating synergistic effects in the form of multiplied benefits (Kauf *et al.*, 2019).

In the professional literature there are various classifications of customer service strategies. Within one of the classifications, service strategies are referred to selected elements related to the process of buyers' service.

Key elements of the customer service strategy include the selection of the so-called service identifier, customer segmentation criteria for service purposes, guidelines for service regulations, principles for the selection of service employees and recommendations on customer service standards (Matusiak, 2008). One can distinguish, for example, between stagnant, imitative, hybrid, distinctive, unique or low-cost strategies.

Within another classification of customer service strategies Kempny (2001) divides them according to the attitude of the company to competition and customers (competitive strategies, non-competitive strategies and modern cooperative strategies), according to market shares (leader's strategies and strategies of other market participants), according to applied logistics solutions in mass market service (standard physical distribution strategies, modern delivery strategies), according to the stage of the company's development and the level of advancement of logistics management (functional service strategies, service strategies in logistics systems, customer service in information networks) and according to geographical range (global and regional strategies).

The above strategies refer to the need for increasing the competitiveness of companies (Harasim, 2018). The most important task of customer service is invariably to gain an advantage over competitors (Smolnik, 2016).

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