

Examining the Relationship between Service Environment and Customer Satisfaction in Service Encounters in Selected Superstores in Enugu, South East Nigeria

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Abstract

The development of services as part of marketing activities began a few years ago when scholars began to treat services no longer as physical product appendages but as marketing activities on their own. Services thus metamorphosed from being “product marketing carriers” or product augments to being “self-carriers”. That is, services that used to be the final pack by which products were delivered to customers and were not seen as a process or marketing activities on their own now became self-asserting. Thus, if services have fully become distinctive marketing activities that could offer customer satisfaction, how about the environment where these services are performed – whether as service offering or product carrier or augments? What contribution does the service environment make in order to enhance customer satisfaction from service offering? In other words, how does superior service delivery depend on the environment where such service is delivered in order to produce customer satisfaction? That is, what is the correlation between strong service environment and superior service delivery? This is what this study examined and found that the service environment, to a large extent, determines the mode and manner of satisfactory service delivery. The mode and manner of service delivery determine customers’ satisfaction.

Keywords: Service Environment, Satisfaction, Superior Service, Service Delivery, Quality Service

1. Introduction

Some people, including some marketers, are yet to perceive that services are no longer consigned to the apron string of products or simply regarded as intangible products. This earlier thinking restrained early marketing scholars and practitioners from advancing beyond the traditional 4 Ps of marketing mix. Today we have the 7 or 8 Ps of services marketing mix, still drawing partly though from the familiar terrain of the product marketing mix. In order to establish a clear understanding of the concept of services in this work, it is necessary to examine the true meaning of services. The reason is that while we talk about services as part of a product delivery package, we shall as well dwell on services as part of a service system in “service offering”. This thinking is already causing a shift in financial services literature, especially in the banking sector where practitioners referred to their services in the past as products but have shifted to “service offerings” now. Farquhar and Meidan (2010) for example refer to financial services as “any service or product of a financial nature that is traded in financial markets; especially, they are financial instruments”. Earlier, Farquhar and Meidan (2010) had posited that “services are products that we purchase and consume in ever-growing quantities; they range from restaurant meals to university education” Meals certainly are tangible products, so how is it that when their sale in restaurants is discussed, only the service is mentioned? This is the reason it is necessary to examine the meaning of services. In the case of restaurant business, the service of meals appears to take preeminence over the actual product served – the meal. This is very unlike the university education where no physical object is offered to the students by the lecturer.

Meier and Krug (2009) in addressing standardization of service delivery refer to service delivery as “a kind of extemporaneous process whose management depends on the operating experience of the service technician” that means the service provider. Here Meier and Krug are referring to service in terms of “service offering” and not as a product augments.

According to Marcus et al (1980), “Services are activities performed by individuals or organizations for other individuals or organizations”. Essentially, this is what a service is but again new definitions may arise on the subject matter. Along this line, Kotler (1988) defined service as “any act or performance that is essentially intangible and does not result in the ownership of anything. Its production may or may not be tied to a physical product”. Seemingly looking different but same, Onkvisit and Shaw (2004) posit that “services, broadly defined, encompass all economic activities other than agriculture, manufacturing, and mining”.

Lovelock and Wright (2002) argue that services are difficult to define because of their diversity, that is, their application in “service offerings” and as product augments – going with delivery of products. They, however, tried to define a “service as an act or performance that creates benefits for customers by bringing about a desired change in - or on behalf of - the recipient”. This definition appears to be referring to “service offerings” and Lovelock and Wright, appearing to have identified this, went on to state that “the process may be tied to a physical product” though “the performance is essentially intangible and does not normally result in ownership of any of the factors of production”. Here again lies the problem of service as either a “service offering” or as a

service augments or “product carrier”. As a “service offering”, service does not require any physical possession, but as an augments or “product carrier” there is passage of possession from the marketer to the customer.

Taking the case of a supermarket or superstore which is the focus of study in this paper, the service-offerings rendered in a supermarket entail products plus services. That is products and “products carriers”. The customer who walks into a supermarket hopes to walk out with something from one of the shelves. How he or she walks out – satisfied or dissatisfied – may not necessarily arise from the product purchased but on how the product was delivered to him or her. The challenge of this study is to examine how customers perceive a service from the point of either product carrier/augments or “service offering”.

2. Problem Statement

In the past, there were many supermarkets or superstores in Enugu South East Nigeria that were highly patronized by customers. Today, however, many of those supermarkets, even though they still exist, appear to experience a great decline in customer patronage. Even when these older supermarkets lose patronage, the new ones emerge with greater service environment experience, very high customer traffic and consequently high customer patronage in Enugu. This obviously became a source of worry for the older supermarkets and marketers because even though the prices of products in these older supermarkets are relatively lower than the prices of products in the new superstores, customers still switch out from the products offered in the old supermarkets and switch in to products offered in the new superstores. What could be the cause of this differential patronage among these two service points/environments? Could the apparent differences in service environment features among the two service points account for the differential service patronage? The need for exploring all these becomes very apparent hence this study.

3. Objectives Of The Study

The objectives of this study are to:

1. Determine if strong service environment has an influence on superior service delivery
2. Find out if there is a relationship between strong service environment and customer patronage in the superstores in Enugu, Nigeria
3. Find out if other service environment elements relevant to superior service delivery exist in the superstores in Enugu, Nigeria.

4. Research Questions

1. Do service environment elements influence the level of service delivery in the superstores in Enugu, Nigeria?
2. Is there any relationship between service environment and customer patronage in the superstores in Enugu, Nigeria?
3. Are there other service environment elements relevant to superior service delivery that exist in the superstores in Enugu, Nigeria

5. Hypotheses

HU1: Strong service environment elements do not influence the level of service delivery in Superstores in Enugu North, Nigeria

HU2: Superior service delivery experience by customers does not attract repeat purchase and therefore higher customer patronage.

HU3: Strong service environment elements do not lead to customer satisfaction

6. Review Of Literature

6.1 The Service Environment

The performance of a service for the satisfaction of the customer is apparently contingent on the service environment. Olannye and Chukwu (2011) posit that “the surrounding environment may have a significant effect on the quality of the customer service encounter”. This service environment may be construed as all the elements that add up to the delivery of a product or “service offering” in a satisfactory manner to the customer. These elements include: delivery method, motivation, employee relations, culture, work process, work environment, product/service quality, corporate relations and policy, corporate social responsibility, brand image, the customer etc. (wiki.answers.com; Lovelock and Wright, 2010; Meier and Krug, 2009; Jayawardhane, 2011; www.managementstudyguide.com). In other words, the service environment does not constitute just the physical environment where the service is performed but all that goes into the production and delivery performance of the product or “service offering” including the customer as a co-producer in “service offering”.

6.2 Delivery Method

The method of delivery of a service depends on whether the service is an augmenter or “service offering”. This is so because both types of service may have their unique delivery methods. In the case of service as an augmenter or “product carrier”, the customer is simply a receiver or beneficiary who must be pleased with the manner of service experience. In a “service offering”, however, the customer is seen as part of the service production and reception. This position must be contrasted with the position of service as an augmenter or “product carrier”.

As product augmenters, services can be delivered through direct or indirect channel or both. The channels for delivery of service as augmenters correspond with the product distribution channel whereas “service offerings” pass through direct (or company owned channels) and indirect channels such as franchisees and electronic channels. Thus the firm or “service offering” provider may decide to have outlets where such “service offerings” are provided. The satisfaction enjoyed by the customer in the delivery or performance chain is again dependent on the quality of the personnel carrying out the exercise or the condition of the environment where such delivery is taking place. Jayawardhane (2011) introduces a business-to-business delivery experience not as a new element in services delivery but as a development that requires a delivery system that is consistent with the nature of the buyer. Here the customer is not a final consumer, as most “service offerings” are but may be an industrial buyer or a wholesaler or even a retailer whose interest may not so much lie in the nature or manner of delivery as in the benefits from such delivery. For example, a customer who wants raw material products delivered to his warehouse is not too much concerned about the manner of delivery as to the time of delivery and the condition of the product delivered. Contrast this with a customer who walks into a restaurant for a meal or a supermarket or a retail store for a piece of toilet soap. This later customer will be overly concerned about the disposition of the waiter or the cashier towards him or her. This clarification is important because if the service environment is not well discerned, there could arise a miscarriage or misapplication of service attention.

It should be obvious to the marketer, however, that the fact that the customer of the industrial goods is removed from the delivery point does not reduce the quality of service as a “product carrier” at the delivery point. The next person principle demands that the disposition of the marketer or his agent towards the recipient of the goods on behalf of the customer should be satisfactory. If it is not, the receiver can paint a picture of poor service that can lead the customer to discontinue his/her patronage.

Hyken(2013) observed that “just because an employee understands what it means to deliver great customer service doesn’t mean that he or she is able to deliver it.” Schlesinger and Heskett (1991) posit that “customer satisfaction is rooted in employee satisfaction and retention more than in anything else, including clever technology”. These writers are simply reminding marketing managers that their employees can make or mar the delivery of their best products, no matter the technology employed in producing them. As a matter of fact, Schlesinger and Heskett designed a service-profit-chain that shows how employee satisfaction influences the profit of the firm arising from customer satisfaction or dissatisfaction. This service-profit-chain is shown in Figure 1.

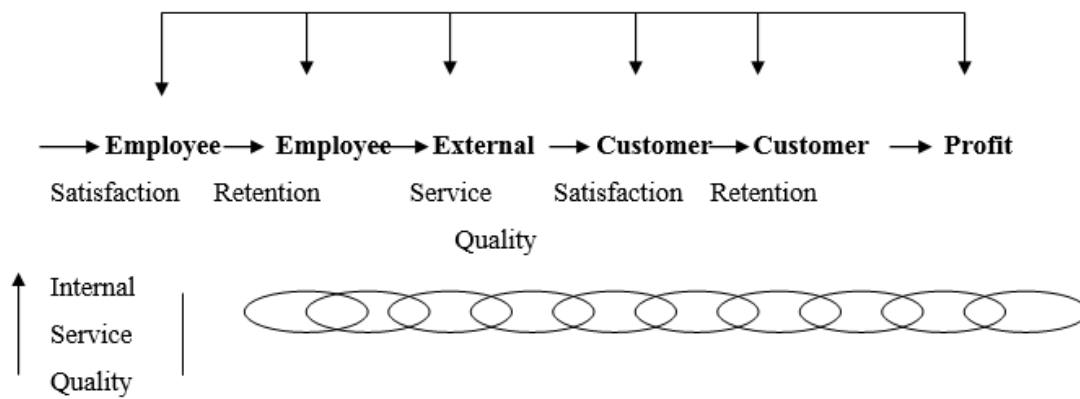


Fig 1 The Service-Profit-Chain (Source: Leonard A. Schlesinger and James L. Heskett, 1991)

The service-profit-chain more than makes clear the position of the employees in superior quality service delivery, whether in service as a “product carrier” or as in “service offering”. The chain shows that employee satisfaction originates from an internal service quality. This means that, as experienced marketing managers should know, the firm has two service environments – the internal and the external service environments. The external service environment relates to the firm and its customers while the internal service environment refers to the firm and its employees. It is the happenings or experiences in the internal service environment that shape the employees’ disposition to offering and delivering superior service experience to customers. And how does this internal service quality influence employees? This can be through employees level of motivation in terms of meeting their psychological contract expectations; job enrichment factors; manager-employee relations; training and

development opportunities; cultural influences, both corporate and environmental cultures; psychological or emotional satisfaction from the job which can be experienced in empowerment, career progression, contribution/participation in decisions opportunity; the demands of the work process; and even the physical work environment. Elton Mayo (1880-1949) found in his Hawthorne study that physical environment had some debilitating influence on employee productivity.

Hyken (2013) agreeing with the influence of training on employees service delivery quality opines that it should be ongoing. That is, it should not be once and for all affair. Olanmnye and Chukwu (2011) state that “In the Nigerian Fast Food Industry, a lot of investments are involved in the service scope. The physical environment of most Nigerian Fast Food outfits suggests that customers infer quality on the basis of their perceptions of the physical facilities.” This is consistent with our observation earlier that physical or work environment contributes to the employees as internal customers psyche and therefore to the nature of service delivery, not just the external customers.

6.3 Culture

The cultural disposition of the firm (corporate culture), the market or operational environment of the firm (societal culture); as well as the employees’ culture of origin (the culture of place of birth) all play different roles in superior service delivery (Lovelock and Wright, 2002; Egol and Kaufield, 2006; Hyken, 2013). From the firm’s point of view, what should be the corporate culture? Is there trust and confidence in management-employees relationship; and in firm-employees-customers’ relationship? Is the firm known for upholding high quality standard or one of those that cut corners? From the societal perspective, what is the society’s attitude towards its products or “service offerings” offered for sale in its environment? For example, in some societies where beef is a taboo, any beef product offered for sale in that environment cannot be received with anything less than royal disdain, no matter the quality of the service delivery. And from the employees’ angle, unless the firm’s corporate culture is overwhelming, employees are likely to bring in some elements of their cultural tendencies or attributes to service delivery. Take the case of a female waiter who refuses to smile to foreign guests because it is against her culture for females to smile to unknown males. Or take the case of the Urhobos in Delta State of Nigeria where married women are forbidden from shaking hands with other males who are not their husbands or blood relations. These cultural attributes can influence (on both sides, that is, positively or negatively) an employee’s service delivery system.

6.4 Quality as a Final Arbiter

Parpal (2013) refers to quality as value when she wrote “when guests come through your doors, they expect quality in every aspect of the restaurant. Guests are looking for a value in the things they see, taste and touch, and so providing them with exceptional quality will certainly leave a good taste in their mouths.” Management Study Guide (2013) refers to quality as a standard thus “after having attained the desired service level, the next great challenge faced by service providers is to maintain service standards at levels of excellence. This is as important, and as tough, as establishing service standards and attaining to them in the first place.” Wikipedia (2013) states “service operation (SO) aims to provide best practice for achievement of the delivery of agreed levels of services both to end users and the customers ...” The import of these observations of the various perspectives of quality is to alert the reader to the fact that quality is perceived from the context of the nature of service delivery. What constitutes the best quality is dependent on the nature, context and scope of the expected product or service delivery. Farquhar and Meidan (2010) point out, however, that “a unique aspect of financial services marketing which differentiates it from other marketing practices is the illusive notion of quality” They observe further that “In the traditional context of marketing manufactured goods, quality is typically objectively measured utilizing standard quality assessment methods {but} in the context of financial services, the notion of quality is a highly subjective phenomenon.”

7. Methodology

This study set out to investigate and answer the above research questions and to verify the hypotheses stated above. The research setting was the superstores (the major supermarkets) in Enugu North local Government Area of Enugu State, Nigeria. The population of the area is 244,852, based on the Nigerian Population Commission, 2006. To determine the sample population for this study, the Taro Yamane’s sample size determination formula for known population was used. Recognizing that the entire population of 244,852 may not constitute the customers of the superstores under study, that is, there are children and the aged who might not make contacts with the superstores for shopping in the population, a significance level of 0.045 level (limit of tolerance error) was used to obtain a sample size of 494 and this figure was approximated to 500.

The study was designed to capture data from the superstores managers and their customers to provide a platform to correlate the findings on the part of the customers with that of the managers. To this end, a total of 5 superstores in the research environment were randomly selected. Questionnaires were designed to be simple and

convenient to respond to in order not to discourage respondents or disrupt business for the superstores under study.

The 500 questionnaires were distributed over a one-week period so as to capture different segments of customers on each day of the week. Mixed questionnaires were used, comprising open-ended questions and ranking scale. Values were assigned to the options not necessarily based on degree or weight of answers but in an order of occurrence in the answer options. To test the hypotheses set above, the Chi-square test was used. Only 389 out of the 500 questionnaires were responded to as 111 questionnaires were not responded to. Of the 389 responses received, 315 (81%) were valid while 74 (19.02%) were invalid, resulting from incomplete response to multiple answers instead of one answer.

8. Result And Analysis

Question 1: This question sought to determine the nature of the customers' patronage at the superstore, whether as loyal customers or just casual non-repeat purchasers.

Table 1 Respondents Loyalty at Superstore

Option	Response Rate	mean	Mean Deviation
(a)	6	3	-0.5
(b)	15	3	-2
(c)	10	3	-1.5
(d)	5	3	0
(e)	2.14	3	4

Chi-square was used to test the independence of the opinion expressed by the customers, that is, whether devoid of any external influence. Using Chi-Square at 5% confidence level at 4 degree of freedom and 5 degree of freedom for question 5, we have

Table 2 Result of Questionnaire Analysis Using Chi-square

Objective	Chi-Square computed	Tabulated	
To determine that service environment elements existed in the superstore and what they were	8.20	9.48	Accept
Sought to determine customers' response to existing service environment elements	2.09	9.48	Accept
Sought to determine customers' response to service delivery manner	2.10	9.48	Accept
Sought to determine relationship between service environment elements and superior service delivery	6.25	9.48	Accept
To find out if there were other service environment elements in the store and what they were	2.76	11.07	Accept

The customers' response showed that strong service environment elements existed in the superstore understudy. They included convenience – large parking space and shop area for ease of movement; security in the environment; easy and convenient payment system; culture of staff friendliness; and good quality products. Surprisingly, prices of the products sold in the superstore were not among the elements that bothered the respondents. Thus the service delivery environment elements mentioned by the respondents in this study were consistent with literature (Olannaye and Chukwu, 2011; Farquhar and Meidan, 2010; Meier and Krug, 2009).

Research Question 1: The response of the customers showed that service environment elements that existed in the superstore contributed to their patronage at the superstore. This finding is supported by earlier works by Olannaye and Chukwu (2011), Farquhar and Meidan (2010), Meier and Krug (2009), Okoye (2013)

Research Question 2: The findings in this study point to the fact that service environment elements influence the level of superior service delivery offered to customers. It was found that customers could be attended to faster because there were ample space and trolleys (shop carts) to assist customers in making their selection. The captivating smiles (according to respondents) worn by the superstore attendants and their friendly disposition were also noted. Thus staff disposition and manner of service delivery have effect on service delivery and on customers' satisfaction.

Research Question 3: The study found that other service environment elements the customers said they found in the superstore were: (a) acceptance of credit card for payment for their purchases (b) rest areas where customers could stay a while and have rest after shopping (c) melodious music that entertained the customers as they made their shopping (d) enough space to walk around without bumping into someone or causing obstruction for others.

9. Test Of Hypotheses And Discussion

HO1: Since the analysis in Table 2 showed that the Chi-square computed result for question 5 at 2.76 was lower than the tabulated result of 11.07, the hypothesis that service environment elements have influence on the level or quality of service delivery in the superstore in Enugu, Nigeria is accepted. The null hypothesis that service environment elements do not influence level or quality of service delivery is therefore rejected.

HO2: Chi-square results for questions 1 and 2 at 8.20 and 2.09 were lower than the tabulated results of 9.48. This means the null hypothesis that superior service delivery experience by customers does not attract repeat purchase is rejected and hypothesis HO2 accepted.

HO3: This hypothesis which holds that strong service environment elements lead to customer satisfaction is to be accepted because questions 3 and 4 in Table 2 show that Chi-square results were 2.10 and 6.25 respectively which are lower than the tabulated results of 9.488. HU3 is therefore rejected.

This study revealed that a strong service environment will lead to superior service delivery and which in turn leads to customer satisfaction. In other words, there is a relationship between service environment elements and customer satisfaction. This is consistent with earlier studies by Hart, Heskett and Sasser Jr. (1990) that mistakes cannot be avoided in service delivery but the service environment elements can make up for the mistake and leave the customer satisfied. Olannaye and Chukwu (2011) referred to service environment elements as environment quality. The respondents in this study agreed that price of the products was important but equally important were other service elements found in the service environment. Specifically the respondents held that the manner of delivery of a service, that is, the staff disposition, the store environment inside and outside, which include security, convenience in shopping and parking space, were the necessary elements that offered them satisfaction.

This study has thrown up a lot of implication and challenge for superstores' managers. It was found that staff disposition as well as physical outlay of the store environment contribute to service environment elements that lead to superior service delivery and therefore to customer satisfaction. This is consistent with Hyken (2013); Schlesinger and Heskett (1991); Lovelock and Wright (2002); KaufieldEgol (2006); and Okoye (2013). Superstores managers can now see that there actually exist strong relationships among service environment elements, superior service delivery and customer satisfaction. These relationships are shown in the model below.

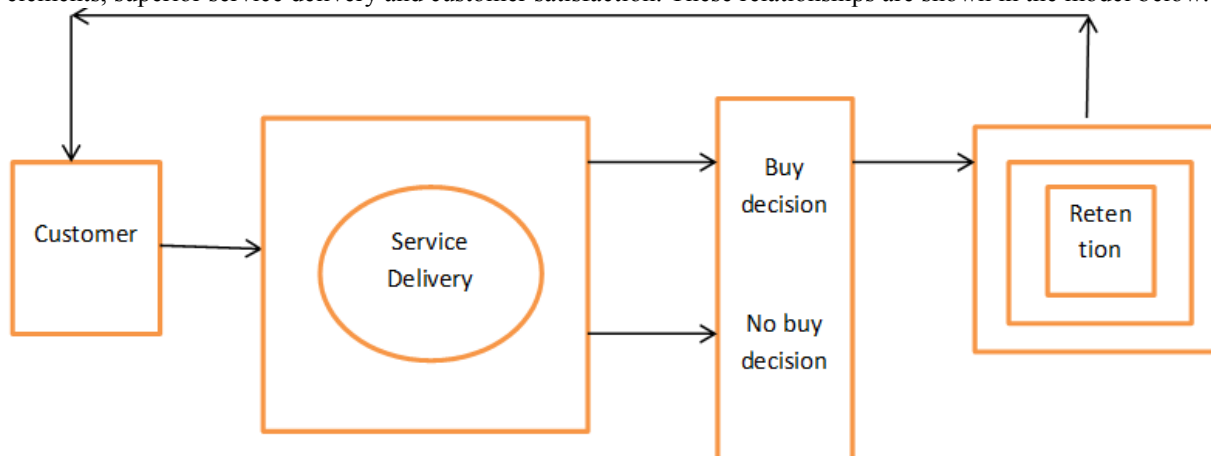


Fig 2: Service Environment Delivery Satisfaction Model, developed by the Researchers

10. Discussion Of Research Findings

This study is interesting and rich in our experiences and findings. The necessity for superior service delivery elements is not dependent on customer loyalty. Our study revealed that most of our respondents at the superstore who were buying for the first time, read 23.64 points tabulated on Chi-square statistic; those who bought things at the superstore once a while, read 65.46 points; and those who bought monthly, read 30.0 points. Those who bought daily and weekly at the store, interestingly, read 13.64 points and 17.27 points respectively. In other words, the frequency of purchase or appearance at a service point does not determine a customer's expectation of a superior service. As a matter of fact, the first time experience could be (and most often are) the deciding factor in a repeat purchase. Okoye (2013) showed that a trial experience of a purchase to a large extent determines whether the customer should switch out of his previous product of choice and switch in to the new product. But again this will depend on satisfying other service delivery and need satisfying attributes of the product. And of course this point is important. This is where the "product carrier" service feature is different from a "service offering" feature.

In the former, non-need satisfying elements or gaps in a service delivery can be concealed for a later experience but it is readily and instantly exposed in a "service offering". The case of Carllil and Carbolic

Smokeball Co. was good example of a product carrier service concealing a non-need satisfying content of a product. That could not have been experienced in a barber's salon or a restaurant where the meal is consumed insitu.

As to the factors that attracted the customers to the store, our study revealed that "convenience" had the highest influence at 50 respondents followed by "quality of products" at 35 of the respondents. This result appears logical because quality will be tried out when it is convenient to do so. However, convenience can be reinforced with a superior quality leading to loyalty. Ordinarily, accessibility would be thought of being part of convenience but the service point could be accessible without being convenient, just as it could be convenient in terms of enjoying the service as a product carrier but not accessible in terms of service offering. For example the respondents' free opinions in question 5 of the questionnaire showed their craving for parking space and a better security system. This is what Olannye and Chukwu (2011) referred to as service environment quality. The study would have determined what the managers of the superstore felt about their customers' responses and cravings but this opportunity was lost in their refusal to be part of this study.

Hart, Heskett, and Sasser Jr. (1990) state "mistakes are a critical part of every service. Hard as they try, even the best service companies can't prevent the occasional late flight, burned steaks, or missed delivery". But what about situation of service denial such as failure to provide not out of inadvertence? How does such a failure affect service delivery quality for the purpose of repeat purchase or customer retention in the light of our findings in this study?

The respondents in our study were further probed to rate the superstore in their perceived service delivery performance. Seventeen respondents or 0.11% of the total valid responses were unsatisfied to a certain degree with the service delivery of the store. And where should their opinion be consigned to? Ehikwe and Obeta (2010) report Sagay (2003: xvi) "that whilst this pace of law making has covered the state-producer aspect of the law, the right of consumers to claim damages for loss and injuries suffered as a result of consumption of substandard, adulterated or fake goods has been largely ignored". What are the losses or injuries suffered in service delivery? Many researchers would point to product or "service offering" defects. But what about denials as experienced by our respondents, where they were denied superior service delivery? Here Ehikwe and Obeta (2010) provide the answer: "consumer protection has suffered from legal jargon in seeking to know who a consumer is and what consumer protection should be".

11. Conclusion

The delivery of service, whether as a "service offering" ("self-carrier") or as a product augments ("product carrier") to the satisfaction of the customer depend on two important variables – the service environment elements and the nature of delivery of the service. The absence of any of these two variables will certainly leave the customer not satisfied. For example, a service environment lacking the essential element for superior service delivery will lead to less than superior service delivery that will not satisfy the customer. Also, since superior service delivery is a human activity, its absence in a service environment with favorable environmental elements will certainly not produce a satisfactory service to the customer.

12. Suggestions For Future Research

This study has opened up issues that need to be explored further. These include:

- (a) The issue of apathy of store managers in Enugu, Nigeria to their stores being used for research can be investigated to find out the actual cause(s) for such apathy, whether this trait is localized or particular to the study area.
- (b) This study could not involve the stores managers in Enugu, Nigeria (as it had intended) to find out their opinion on the issue of the relationship among service environment elements, superior service delivery and customers' satisfaction. Exploring this further will be necessary because unless they recognize these relationships as essential for customer satisfaction, they are likely to overlook some vital service environment elements such as employee motivation, cultural disposition of the store towards employees and customers, work environment, work process, delivery method etc. which Schlesinger and Heskett (1991) have found to have a link not only with customer satisfaction but also with the profit objective of the firm.
- (c) Though the findings in this study are consistent with literature, there is also a need for further research to find out if size of stores and customer traffic in such large stores would generate a different result.

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