KEY ISSUES TO ADDRESS IN APPLYING BEST PRACTICES FOR SERVICE QUALITY IN TELEMATIC LEARNING AT THE POTCHEFSTROOM UNIVERSITY FOR CHRISTIAN HIGHER EDUCATION

"A complaint is a gift.
It is how you thank the giver
of the gift that strengthens the relationship"

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ABSTRACT

The active role played by Telematic Learning Systems (TLS) in the education of off-campus students in South Africa is a strategic thrust to make tertiary education accessible to all the people of South Africa. As a result, the accessibility of quality tertiary education via contact-over-distance learning programmes requires new paradigms and approaches from the Potchefstroom University for Christian Higher Education (PU for CHE), one of which is the approach to customer service in delivering quality service to the students.

In order to supply the ultimate learning value to students, the concept of customer service is becoming increasingly important. Customer service should not be regarded as a surrogate for academic excellence but it certainly enhances the value gained through distance learning on a tertiary level. TLS is a support department that delivers and administrates all the degree and diploma programmes developed by the academic departments at the PU for CHE and has adopted a strong customer aligned approach as a strategic thrust and students are treated as valued clients of the university. Continuous customer satisfaction research is conducted and this paper reports on the results of one such a research project.

This paper reports on the service levels of telematic students as experienced during their first semester of the 2002 academic year. The analysis employed a customer service index for all functional areas of service delivery as well as an analysis of the five service dimensions (as suggested by research from Parasuraman, Zeithaml & Berry (1985)) of the service encounter. In addition, a managerial approach is followed where the focus of service quality improvement aims to apply the best practices on the identified communalities of service quality. This focused approach thus aims service quality management to be specific to the communal problematics, rather than a more generic approach of general service improvement.

Six customer service principles were identified from the literature research while the results showed that in most of these areas, customers experience a satisfactory service encounter at TLS. Two areas showed unfavourable service levels, namely: study centre visits and the Student accounts. The analysis on the five service dimensions showed that all the dimensions are satisfactory but need more attention to derive at excellent service levels. The other dimensions showed favourable indices. The result of the Cronbach Alpha coefficient as the reliability test on the data set is favourable ($\alpha > 0.85$). The results could thus be regarded as reliable and usable in managerial application.

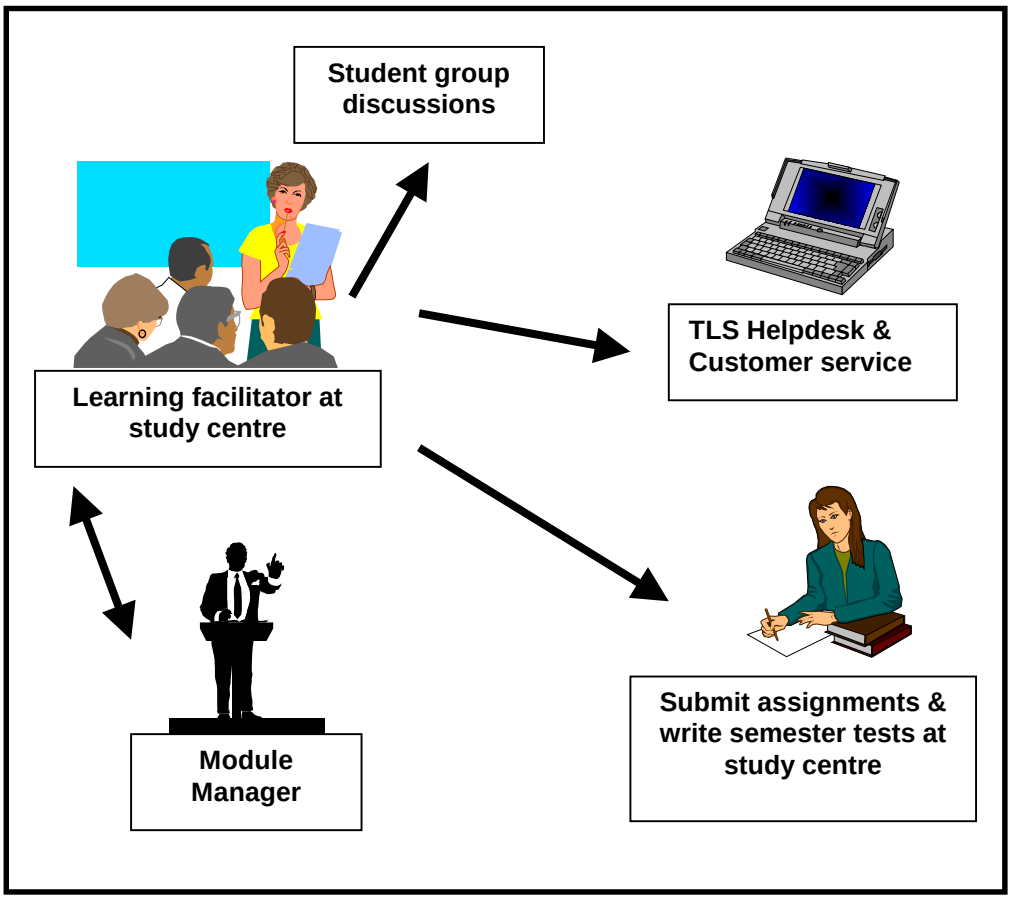
The results are of significant value, firstly, to the PU for CHE that attempts to improve the service quality to students. The PU for CHE now has a better understanding of its customer service levels and should be able to focus managerial energy in these areas. Secondly, students should gain from efficiently trained front-line staff who is educated in clients' expectations of service levels. Thirdly, other researchers in service quality could use the results as a measure for future research since it provides a frame of reference to them.

INTRODUCTION

In an era of technological advancement, global economy and mobility of personnel, the traditional geographic compartmentalisation of university markets is fast becoming obsolete. Universities no longer serve their immediate communities exclusively, while educational technology empowers distance educational institutions to enter into global markets (Rossouw, 1998). The Potchefstroom University for Christian Higher Education (fromhereto referred to as the PU for CHE) strategically repositioned itself in 1995 to extend their educational reach beyond their traditional geographic borders. In 1995 a specialised service department called Telematic Learning Systems (referred to as TLS from here on), was established to assist academic departments to deliver the *contact-over-distance* education to the South African market. The first degree was the Bachelors degree in Business Administration (1995), soon to be followed by a Masters degree in Business Administration in 1997. Various other educational needs were identified and the PU for CHE currently delivers 11 degree and diploma programmes, ranging from under-graduate diplomas to masters' degrees, via TLS. Currently the telematic *contact-over-distance* route of education delivery, services almost 3000 students annually.

Telematic Learning implies a distance learning system whereby state of the art technology in some academic programmes (determined by the need and technological readiness of students) is available to students at study centres all over the country. This includes telephone conferencing, inter-active electronic communication networks, module facilitators under the university's guidance, and value-adding videotapes and CD Roms (in addition to traditional distance learning that mostly uses study guides and textbooks). The TLS learning model is shown in Figure 1 (Bisschoff, Lotriet & Bisschoff, 2000: 3).

FIGURE 1: THE TELEMATIC LEARNING MODEL



Since the founding of TLS in 1995, customer service has been identified as a strategic thrust to ensure success in the ever-increasing competitive environment of tertiary education. Initially, customer surveys were conducted to assess the performance of TLS, academics, learning facilitators and the administrative functions performed by the PU for CHE. These surveys greatly assisted in the determination of the relevant service levels, and management acted on the service signals to enhance customer satisfaction. However, as the venture grew and TLS obtained a higher position on the industry learning curve, it became obvious that a system of best practices in customer service management and measurement needs to be fine-tuned and implemented. An obvious departure was the literature to establish the foundation of best customer service practices before implementing such practices in TLS.

BEST PRACTISES: LITERATURE REVIEW

As early as 1960, Theodore Levitt wrote, in his marketing classic "*Marketing Myopia*", that customer service "*involves more than good intentions or promotional tricks. It involves profound matters of human organization and leadership*."(Enis, Cox & Mokwa, 1996). In addition, Porter (1980) in his landmark book, suggested that to be successful, companies have to choose between two generic strategies (that could be also directly applied to services as well), namely:

- Cost leadership (low price); or
- Differentiation (perceived quality).

These strategies have the benefit of not getting "stuck-in-the-middle", and make a lot of sense if one assumes a slow changing world (Manning, 1989:14). However, technological advancement and globalisation currently obliviates these once highly valuable inputs in strategic thinking and competitive strategies. New paradigms and rules to play by are needed to ensure that competitive strategies, which could also relate to service levels, are formulated. TLS is by no means an exception to the case as competitiveness in the off-campus educational market is stringent not only from local providers, but also from international role-players that enters the traditional South African educational market.

In the research, a number of schools of thought regarding service excellence are employed to determine the practical implementation of best service practices at TLS. The research by Peters (Enis, et al, 1996), Lovelock (2000: 29), Parasuraman, Zeithaml & Berry (1985) (in Nel, Pitt & Bromfield, 1995: 239-241), Manning (1989:14-20, 35-46) and Bisschoff (1998:2-6) are employed in the TLS approach to customer excellence and performance. The base of the TLS customer service is formed by a number of principles resulting from these philosophers of service excellence. Application of the best practices model thus builds onto these building blocks to supply a:

- Clear picture of customer service levels; and
- Set of management focus areas to be improved or to be kept in harmony.

The principles identified to be part of the TLS' search for the best practices in customer service are:

Principle 1: **The famous words by Peters: "*What gets measured, gets done*"**

Without measurement of the actual performance of the level of service provided to customers (students), there can be no improvement nor can there be any managerial information to base managerial decisions on. Measurement is imperative in managing service levels. Measurement at TLS also adheres to the two constraints of *timeously* and *accuracy*.

The research by Bisschoff (1998, 2000) is employed to measure individual service criteria. Parasuraman, Zeithaml & Berry (1985) (in Nel, et al: 239-241), and especially the so-called *Gap 5,* serves as another measuring tool to determine the performance and gap between *performance* and *expectations* relating to the five service criteria, namely: *tangibility*, *responsiveness, empathy, reliability* and *assurance*.

Principle 2: **Understand the nature of the service delivered**

TLS is active in a service process which involves the direct actions to people's minds. That is to deliver a process of mental stimulus that involves the customer to a larger extent than most other service systems. The customer must become an integral part of the service process to experience satisfaction (Lovelock, 2000: 29). The learning model and all accessories are merely tools to transfer knowledge (education), and the danger in intellectual stimulus service delivery is that if a student does not become part of the system, natural dissatisfaction results because he/she is not successful in studying. This presents a polarity since the researcher must attempt to identify if low grades result from the student's own doing, or from the fact that the tools to transfer the knowledge (for example: facilitators, studyguides, textbooks, videos) are to blame.

Principle 3: Academic quality

Quality in the intellectual stimulus service sector refers not only to academic quality per se, but also to how this intellectual service is transferred in an educational environment. Academic quality of the degree of diploma is an integral part of the choice of supplier of education. This aspect is not negotiable because it culminates in the concept of value purchased by a specific learner of student. Therefore, high quality academic programmes are part and parcel of the purchasing contract, and the university must act as custodian of that value throughout its academic existence. As mentioned (Principle 2), the successful transfer of the academic knowledge to obtain the required standard is an important service issue for TLS. For example, students simply cannot internalise the needed knowledge if their study time is limited due to delays in the receipt of their study material. TLS thus focuses very strongly on supplying quality service to enable knowledge transfer.

Principle 4: A total onslaught

Gutek & Welsh (2000:3 & 67-68) reason that service is everybody's responsibility. Service strategy formulation and drive results from the organisation's strategic plan, and must be implemented from the top down. This principle is well in place at TLS since top management appoints and pledges support to a specialist serving as Manager: Customer Relationships. The problem to implement such a strategy is that, although well established, not all personnel regard customer service to be equally important, and own perceptions regarding what good service entails, are adhered to more naturally. This flaw of differential service standards is dealt with by continuous training and heightened awareness of service excellence.

Principle 5: Communication

Communication remains one of the most important elements of service delivery and is frequently the culprit of unsatisfactory service levels

(Manning, 1989). TLS thus aims to render special effort in communication with students and other role-players in the delivery of the academic programmes. Of special interest here is also internal communication between TLS and academics. TLS successfully uses a system of academic programme managers in their communication with the academic departments.

Principle 6: Loci of control

External loci of control remain to be problematic in rectifying service levels (Coetsee, 2000: 46-48). Personnel would simply not accept that they are responsible if service levels were not exceptional. Due to the characteristic that services are intangible and consumed while being produced, it is also not possible to re-enact a service delivery scenario. Two benefits would be possible if service delivery could be made more tangible, namely: for training purposes where an employee could be "reliving" the exact service encounter and be trained to respond in an improved manner. Alternatively, a more tangible service encounter could also have the benefit of learning more about customer expectations and their resultant behaviour. Technology could be employed to obtain this tangibility by recording all conversations with customers and to create a forum where "difficult" service encounters be used as case studies during training sessions.

From the literature, a number of principles that serve as a base for customer service management have been identified. Empirically, the measurement as stated in Principle 1, attempts to adhere to these principles while also attempting to identify some other issues that TLS should focus on. By no means is the list of principles complete to ensure that the best practices are followed, but it supplies a framework that could be used to build on in the future.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

The research population consisted of all telematic learning students in 2002 at the PU for CHE. No sample was drawn and all the students enrolled during the 2002 academic year received the questionnaire. A total of 2858 questionnaires were distributed in a mail survey, resulting in a total of 449 returned questionnaires suitably completed. A response rate of 17% realised. The questionnaire used a five-point Likert judgmental scale ranging from 1 (very poor/never) to 5 (very good/always).

The data set was tested for reliability and internal stability by means of the Cronbach's Alpha coefficient. Results showed a favourable coefficient above 0,85 that is regarded as a reliable and usable data set for the use in a managerial application (McDaniel & Gates, 1999).

The five-point Likert scale was converted to percentage format to enhance understanding of the results. It is also important to note that the Likert-scale values have been adapted to reflect perceptions more accurately as suggested by Schreuder (2001). Table 1 shows the conversion table.

TABLE 1: CONVERSION OF LIKERT SCALE VALUES

LIKERT SCALE	CONVERTED
1	0%
2	25%
3	50%
4	75%
5	100%

RESULTS

The results are presented by firstly showing the satisfaction levels regarding the different front-line service encounters of customers with TLS, and secondly, the scores on the five mentioned service dimensions of Parasuraman, Zeithaml & Berry (1985).

The results show the summarised values per service category and refer only to individual criteria in the discussion where outlier values are recorded. The summarised results of the categorical analysis appears in Table 2.

TABLE 2: SERVICE CATEGORIES AND RECORDED SCORES

SERVICE CATEGORY	SCORED VALUE (%)
Contact during the year	74.6
Personal visit to TLS	81.3
Dispatch of study material	73.7
Academic issues	78.2
Study centres	74.3
Study centre visits	63.1
Student accounts	68.0
Assignments and marks	76.5
Communication	73.0
Examination venues	76.9
General information	70.0
AVERAGE SCORE	**73.6**

From Table 2 it is evident that two areas do not perform satisfactorily (below the 70% satisfaction level). These two areas (shaded in Table 2) relate to service levels regarding the study centre visits and the Student accounts. The average service satisfaction score is 73% that is regarded to be satisfactory, but far from an excellent level of service delivery.

The individual criteria in the questionnaire have been classified according to the different service dimensions and the scores of each service dimension were calculated. The results of the service dimensions, identified by the research of Parasuraman, Zeithaml & Berry (1985), appear in Table 3.

TABLE 3: SERVICE DIMENSIONS

SERVICE DIMENSION	SCORED VALUE (%)
Tangibility	77.3
Reliability	73.9
Responsiveness	78.0
Assurance	74.6
Empathy	73.9

Concerning the five service dimensions, all the dimensions measure satisfactorily, but once again, not in the range of service excellence. The results from Table 3 correlates with that in Table 2 showing that not one or two isolated failures occur with regard to service quality at TLS, but that the total service levels need to be improved. All five the dimensions thus need attention to improve service levels. Currently, satisfaction is achieved, but incremental advances on all fronts are needed to achieve service excellence.

CONCLUSION

Six customer service principles were identified from the literature research while the results showed that in most of these areas, customers experience a satisfactory service encounter at TLS. The analysis on the five service dimensions showed that all the dimensions need more attention to improve service levels, and that no specific service dimension is to blame. The result of the reliability test: Cronbach's Alpha coefficient, is also favourable. The results from the categorical analysis correlate with this reasoning because average to good scores are recorded, showing that overall, TLS have obtained fair levels of customer satisfaction, but faces the challenge to deliver exceptional service to delight their customers.

The results are of significant value, firstly, to the PU for CHE that constantly strive to improve the service quality to students. The PU for CHE now has a better understanding of its customer service levels and should be able to focus

managerial energy in these areas. Secondly, students should gain from efficiently trained front-line staff who is educated in clients' expectations of service levels. Thirdly, other researchers in service quality could use the results as a measure for future research since it provides a frame of reference to them.

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