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# **GET A CLUE: HOW ENTREPRENEURS CAN MANAGE THE SERVICE EXPERIENCE TO DIFFERENTIATE THEMSELVES & PROVIDE VALUE PROPOSITIONS THAT MAXIMIZE CUSTOMER SATISFACTION**

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## **ABSTRACT**

*Customers see and process more information than entrepreneurs may realize when purchasing products and even more so when purchasing services. This article contends that Customer Service Management should be included in the business plan for every entrepreneur's venture, and it should also be considered for small business growth. Customer Experience Management is defined by three clues: 1) Functional - concern over the technical quality of the service, for example does the food itself taste good in your restaurant. It involves the reliability and quality of the product itself; 2) Mechanic – involves the non-human elements in the service environment consisting of design and ambient factors such as lighting or noise. The physical environment can powerfully influence people's cognition, emotions and behavior; and 3) Humanic - employee behaviors during a transaction are also powerful in contributing to a customer's perceptions of service quality such as being attentive, helpful, and polite. The functional clues can be addressed in the product or service plan of the business plan. The mechanic clues can be addressed in the operations plan. And the humanic clues can be addressed in the management plan. Examples of how this is done is provided in the literature, but more even more so in a case study we used to illustrate how a small entrepreneurial company has used all three functional clues to maximize customer satisfaction leading the firm to growth opportunities.*

## **INTRODUCTION**

Entrepreneurs operating service-based businesses must offer exceptional customer service as “the” key factor for success, which can be a unique and more challenging charge than entrepreneurs who strictly operate a commodity or goods-based business; this is primarily due to the fundamental difference in what they are offering the customer. Service providers must always be on their toes, primarily because services are performances rather than objects, which means that the customer has nothing to hold and examine or try before purchase, and oftentimes owns no real tangible asset after purchase. As a result, services are more difficult for customers to evaluate. Because of this lack of tangibility, customers form their service evaluations on the things that they can perceive through their five senses, such as the comfort of furnishings, diplomas and décor of a lawyer's office, the appearance and behavior of the office receptionist, or the aroma in a spa.

In using the traditional business plan model, entrepreneurs really only address functional clues, which are the rational value propositions of the product or service they are providing. They do not adequately nor specifically address the mechanic or humanic clues or emotional

components of Customer Experience Management. The focus is primarily on the functional aspects of the experience, such as the reliability and quality of the product itself. At no point in the traditional business plan is there a specific section to describe how they will establish that emotional connection with potential customers. According to Berry, Wall and Carbone (2006), great organizations go beyond the functional aspects of the business to establish emotional connections with their customers. This allows them to go beyond the commodity of the service offering, thus increasing customer commitment to the business. Wall and Envick (2008) suggest that Customer Experience Management, with its three clues of service, should be incorporated into the business plan development process as a first step. In this paper we look at a real business to examine their Customer Experience Management techniques to and explore how they utilize these clues in their operations. Then, we contend that each of the three clues should be included in the business plan to illustrate their value by service entrepreneurs so they can increase customer satisfaction and differentiate themselves in the marketplace. Through our case study, we illustrate how each clue is executed to promote customer satisfaction.

## **THE THREE CLUES OF EXPERIENCE MANAGEMENT**

In interacting with organizations, customers see and process more information than service entrepreneurs may realize. In choosing and using services, customers frequently behave like detectives as they search for information and organize their perceptions into a set of feelings about the service. Anything the customer perceives through the five senses is a clue (Berry, Wall and Carbone, 2006). For example, everything on a restaurant table potentially communicates to customers, including the table covering used, if any; the use of paper or cloth napkins and their texture; the cleanliness of the table, and of course, the presentation and taste of the meal.

Berry, Carbone and Haeckel (2002) discuss three categories of clues present in the service experience: functional clues, mechanic clues and humanic clues. Functional clues concern the technical quality of the service. For example, the taste and freshness of a shrimp scampi restaurant meal is a functional clue. Mechanic clues are non-human elements in the service environment consisting of design and ambient factors. Mechanic clues include the service provider's equipment and the service facility's layout, lighting and color. For example, the hair stylists' stations or the shampoo area, as well as ambience and décor serve as mechanic clues in a hair salon. Humanic clues consist of the behavior of service employees, including body language, tone of voice, and level of enthusiasm. For example, the warm, friendly smile and sincere greeting of a receptionist illustrate humanic clues.

### **Functional Clues**

Functional clues are the basis for service success – the core of the business offering that meets the customer's need or want. Few restaurateurs would argue that quality, wholesome food served at an appropriate temperature is a must for a positive dining experience. Customer Experience Management suggests that functional clues primarily influence customers' cognitive perceptions of service quality (Berry, Wall and Carbone 2006). However, while functional clues (technical competence) are the foundation of the service experience, by themselves they are not enough to differentiate a firm that hopes to build its brand and provide value propositions that promote their reputation for great service. For example, a rude, bored, or unavailable server can effectively ruin a customer's restaurant experience even if the meal was

prepared properly. This is consistent with the findings of Parsa, et. al. (2005), who found that while food quality was critical to restaurant success, alone it did not guarantee success. A great service experience that truly differentiates the service components relies on mechanic and humanic clues as well. While entrepreneurs may address functional clues in the 'Service Plan' section of a business plan, they also need to incorporate mechanic clues in the 'Operations Plan' and humanic clues in the 'Management Plan'.

## **Mechanic Clues**

Throughout the service experience, customers are affected by a variety of mechanic clues. Literature in environmental psychology and marketing form the theoretical basis in this area of inquiry. Environmental psychology draws from the stimulus-organism-response (SOR) paradigm in psychology and generally finds that the physical environment can powerfully influence people's cognition, emotions and behavior. People rely on the environment for meaning about their world and for behavioral guidance. In addition, the environment can influence feelings, which may encourage people to remain in it or to leave it (Mehrabian and Russell, 1974; Russell and Pratt, 1980; Spangenberg, Crowley and Henderson, 1996).

Research in marketing draws from theories in environmental psychology to examine the impact of the environment on customer affect, attitudes, service evaluation, behavior and sales. In the context of retailing, Kotler (1973) defines atmospherics as the conscious design of space to create certain effects in buyers that enhance purchase likelihood. He states that atmosphere can affect purchase behavior in three ways. As an attention-creating medium, the atmosphere can make a retail facility distinctive through design, color, motion or sound. Consider the interior of the Hard Rock Café restaurant, for example. In this restaurant, customers are surrounded by authentic rock and roll memorabilia such as a guitar signed by John Lennon or a leather jacket worn by Elvis Presley hung on the walls. These mechanic clues help to differentiate the Hard Rock brand. As a message-creating medium, the atmosphere provides discriminative stimuli to buyers that enable them to recognize store differences as a basis for choice. For example, soft lighting, snowy white linen tablecloths and the crystal chandeliers of a gourmet restaurant communicates to customers the type of food and level of service that make up a fine dining experience. Finally, as an affect-creating medium, atmospheric elements such as color, smell, sound and texture evoke visceral reactions that influence purchase probability. At Walt Disney World in Orlando, for example, the smell of chocolate chip cookies baking is piped from the underground to the park's main street inside the front gate to greet guests, create warm feelings, and encourage them to enter and enjoy the park.

Research in services marketing has shown that in inseparable services, such as in restaurants and hotels, where both the customer and service provider must be present, the physical environment where the service is performed influences customer perception of service quality (Ha, Jooyeon and SooCheong Jang 2012; Baker, Grewel and Parasuraman, 1994). For example, Bitner (1990) found that travel agency customers were less likely to attribute service failures to the companies when employees had clean, organized desks. The mechanic clues in the service environment also assist customers in understanding and interpreting the service (Carbone and Haeckel, 1994). Consider the interior of a fast-food restaurant, for example. The service counters where customers line up to place orders communicate the self-serve nature of the experience.

In a study of the influence of environment on quality inferences and store image, Baker, Grewal and Parasuraman (1994) found that ambient elements of the store environment provide information that consumers use to infer quality. Studies of the relative importance of intrinsic and extrinsic factors have shown that extrinsic factors become more important to consumers in judging quality when intrinsic factors are not available or when evaluation of intrinsic factors is difficult (Hartline and Jones, 1996; Zeithaml, 1988). Mechanic clues influence customers' service perceptions because these clues are part of the experience. Uncomfortable seats in a theater, offensive signs in a retail store (e.g., "break it and you've bought it") and tables too close together in a restaurant directly detract from customers' service experiences. In addition to their impact on customers during the service experience, mechanic clues also have the unique ability to influence customers before they experience either functional or humanic clues. For example, while waiting for a financial advisor, the client begins to form an evaluation of the legal service based on the physical characteristics of the waiting area.

Customer perceptions of service quality are subjective evaluations of a service experience, and customer expectations are the standards against which such service experiences are compared (Zeithaml, Berry and Parasuraman, 1993). Bitner (1990) proposes that the "servicescape" can influence customers through its effects not only on perceived performance but also on prior expectations. Thus, an important function of mechanic clues is their influence on customer expectations. Along with price, tangibles or mechanic clues have been found to function as implicit service promises. Implicit service promises lead to inferences about what the service should be like (Zeithaml, Berry and Parasuraman, 1993). Research indicates that customers often use price and tangibles as surrogates of quality (Zeithaml, 1988). For example, a customer would expect a higher level of personal service at a luxurious, expensive hotel than at a budget hotel with minimal facilities. This is consistent with Sharma and Stafford (2000), who suggest that environment-based perceptions of a retail store can influence customer beliefs about the people who work there and that nicer environments are generally associated with more credible service providers. Thus, a primary function of mechanic clues is to not only 'set the stage,' for the experience, but enhance quality perceptions during it. A strong mechanic clue plan should be incorporated into the 'Operations Plan' section of the business plan, such as a blueprint for a gym or a flowchart for a spa.

## **Humanic Clues**

In addition to mechanic clues, employee behaviors during a service also provide powerful clues contributing to customers' perceptions of service quality (Berry and Bendapudi, 2003; Bitner, Booms and Mohr, 1994; Bitner, Booms and Tetreault, 1990; Zeithaml, Parasuraman and Berry, 1985). Like mechanic clues, humanic clues also primarily influence quality perceptions (Berry, Wall and Carbone 2006). Berry and Lampo (2004) found that labor-intensive service brands can be only as strong as the people performing the service because customers' actual service experiences are most influential in establishing brand meaning. A service provider's pacing in the service process and caring attention to customers' readiness for the next step are likely to strongly influence perceptions of service quality. Thus, while mechanic clues can 'set the stage,' influencing customer expectations for performance and adding value to the service, humanic clues play a prominent role in 'delivering the promise' through the service provider's performance. Humanic clues should be included in an entrepreneur's business plan in the 'Management Plan' section (Wall and Envick 2008), with



specific areas addressing hiring (e.g., the type of person delivering the service should have great interpersonal skills as well as an interest or passion for serving other people), training, and rewards system to instill and reward the behaviors the business requires.

## **Managing the Clues**

While managing all three clues is critical for service success, research shows some subtle nuances that entrepreneurs should keep in mind. First of all, since mechanic clues can be experienced prior to functional or humanic clues, entrepreneurs can use them to attract new customers, and manage expectations to generate repeat business, which is the biggest factor in small business growth. Second, as important as are the roles mechanic clues can play in influencing customers' expectations and perceptions of service quality, humanic clues typically have even stronger effects for labor-intensive services in which customers and service providers interact extensively. In a study of the sources of services' brand strength, Berry and Lampo (2004) found that employee behavior was, by far, the most influential factor in shaping customers' perceptions of their high- and low-preference brands. This finding was supported by Zhang, Zhang and Law (2014), who found that humanic attributes were more important than mechanic attributes in influencing customer satisfaction with the service. The more important, personal and enduring the customer-service provider interaction, the more pronounced this effect is likely to be.

Finally, while mechanic and humanic clues have different roles, they ultimately work together in their influence on customer perceptions of service quality. Wall and Berry (2007) studied the combined effects of mechanic and humanic clues in a casual dining restaurant, and found that while mechanic clues indeed influence expectations of restaurant customers, humanic clues dominate mechanic clues in influencing service quality perceptions. Not only that, they also found that a restaurant with positive mechanic clues and negative humanic clues had lower service quality ratings than a restaurant with negative mechanic clues and positive humanic clues. Thus a firm that promises one level of service via its mechanic clues is in danger of deepening customer disappointment if its humanic clues do not live up to the implied promise (Wall and Berry (2007).

Engineering Customer Experience Management suggests that functional, mechanic and humanic clues be managed in a consistent way to enhance the customer's service experience (Haeckel, Carbone and Berry, 2003; Berry and Bendapudi, 2003; Carbone and Haeckel, 1994). A comfortable, beautifully decorated salon that delivers excellent service by courteous, well-dressed employees is likely to receive higher service quality ratings from customers than a salon that is strong in one but not both of these clue categories. If inconsistency occurs, however, it is best to be strong in humanic clues. Functional, mechanic, and humanic clues all tell customers a story of the service; consistent stories are better than inconsistent ones. Clue consistency is reinforcing; clue inconsistency undermines the intended service story.

Our case study analysis of an entrepreneur's use of functional, mechanic, and humanic clues in their business is provided below to illustrate how all the clues work together to promote Customer Experience Management, leading to customer satisfaction and differentiation in the marketplace.

## CASE IN POINT – ZEDRIC’S ~ FIT WITH FLAVOR

Programs in entrepreneurial studies that have emerged over the last two decades are arguably the most potent economic force the world has ever experienced, Kuratko (2005) contends, as he further provides statistics regarding the growth-rates in the number of programs. While only a handful of entrepreneurship courses existed at universities in the 1970s, well over 2,200 courses in 1,600 schools offered courses and majors in 2005. And that number has likely grown since Kuratko’s study. Kurtko’s challenge in this paper was for entrepreneurship educators to provide “*complete academic legitimacy*” in the field of study.

The study of entrepreneurship is now a part of the mainstream. The pedagogy is changing based on the broadening of entrepreneurship education by creating more interdisciplinary programs for non-business students, such as in the arts, engineering, and sciences. Kuratko (2005) further states that new and innovative approaches to teaching entrepreneurship must be developed. On a side-note, we began our E-scholar Program in the fall of 2004, open to all majors across campus and consisting of a significant number of out-of-class activities.

Evaluation of program effectiveness is not new. Deniston, Rosenstock, & Getting (1968) discuss this in the public health field, purporting that any program should have an overall objective with an end-result in mind, along with a combination of program activities that can be considered “sub-objectives.” There must be several sub-objectives combined with resources to support the performance of those activities. Even in mentoring programs for students, there must be perceived program effectiveness through a variety of activities and commitments (Allen, Eby, & Lentz, 2006). In their article on student learning outside of the classroom, Kuh, Lund, and Ramin-Gyurnek (1994) state that students should learn and develop in a holistic, integrated way as they engage in both academic and non-academic activities inside and outside of the classroom. A few outcomes they mention include self-confidence, practical competence, and interpersonal competence.

Katz (2003) discusses the presence of entrepreneurship courses in AACSB (The Association to Advance Collegiate Schools of Business) schools. As these numbers grow, and entrepreneurship is seen as more mainstream, entrepreneurship programs must meet AACSB standards by demonstrating the academic legitimacy through the achievement of learning goal outcomes. The main objective of this paper is to demonstrate the success of the outcomes of the E-scholar Program’s learning goals, not only as they relate to the program itself, but in support the mission of our Business School, where the program is housed.

AACSB Accreditation Standards state that, “Learning goals say how the program demonstrates the mission, translating a more general statement of the mission into the educational accomplishments of graduates.” ([www.aacsb.edu/accreditation/business/standards/aol/learning\\_goals.asp](http://www.aacsb.edu/accreditation/business/standards/aol/learning_goals.asp), accessed May 2013). It further states that, “Students and recent graduates of degree programs can provide their insights into the strengths and weaknesses of the educational experience provided by the programs.” Since AACSB uses learning goals to translate the mission of a school to the educational accomplishments of graduates, we felt the best way to ascertain the learning goals for the E-Scholar Program was to survey all those who have completed the program. The focus of the survey was primarily aimed at our School’s

learning goals, but we also added a few questions regarding their general career and educational achievements. AACSB states that, "Student learning is the central activity of higher education," further stating that, "learning expectations derive from a balance of internal and external contributions to the definition of educational goals" ([www.aacsb.edu/accreditation/business/standards/aol/learning\\_goals.asp](http://www.aacsb.edu/accreditation/business/standards/aol/learning_goals.asp), accessed May 2013). Therefore, we felt that these external contributions would serve as a good catalyst to help us improve the program.

## DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS

In this paper we discussed research in Customer Experience Management, with its three clues of service, and how they can be applied by entrepreneurs in service-oriented businesses to increase customer satisfaction and differentiate them in the marketplace to create a competitive advantage. The clues are functional, mechanic, and humanic. We also discussed the specific roles and relative importance of the clues in the service experience. Functional clues are the basis for the service, but alone, they are not sufficient for success. Entrepreneurs must also manage mechanic and humanic clues. Customers look for tangible things, beyond what you are selling tap into their emotions and help them inform their expectations and quality impressions of a service.

In labor-intensive, interactive services, negative humanic clues cannot overcome positive mechanic clues, but positive humanic clues can – to a degree – overcome negative mechanic clues. However, mechanic clues were also found to be associated with customer expectations, so they are still important. At the end of the day, consistency in managing all three clues is key. This provides entrepreneurs with important guidance in managing the quality perceptions of their customers' service experience to differentiate their business, and enhance customer loyalty.

Our case study illustrated how all three clues are incorporated into Zedric's, not only to provide delicious food, but also by consciously managing mechanic and humanic clues to tell their brand story and help them stand out in a very competitive market. This has led them to success at their first location and their ability to open a second location. All entrepreneurs can incorporate these clues into their business plans by specifically addressing each one:

*Functional: Service or Product Plan*

*Mechanic: Operations Plan*

*Humanic: Management Plan*

The three clues are synergistic in nature to the point that it might be difficult to distinguish one from the other, which is all right. You might discuss something specific in both the functional and mechanic areas for example. All entrepreneurs should implement Customer Experience Management into their plans, even those who are already in operation to promote growth. Implementing all three clues is a great growth strategy for small business that needs to boost revenues, and nascent entrepreneurs should always include them in their business plans.

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