

Customer Education in Service Organizations: A Proposed Framework to Enhance Customer Experience

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Abstract

In today's competitive environment, managers and service operators are facing many challenges to provide quality customer experiences. The advancement in technology and the experience seeking consumers have created many opportunities for the service organizations. The high tech and high touch physical, social and virtual environment demand participants to perform transformed roles at various stages of service journey. The role of organizations in educating the experience seeking customers to perform transformed roles has not been stressed by the researchers and the practitioners. The purpose of current study is to develop a comprehensive model with research hypothesis to show relationships among customer education, transformed customer roles and customer experience.

The study is based on the comprehensive literature review and the participant and field observations of different service organizations in France and Pakistan including hospitals, public libraries, social security office, tourism offices, district and regional administration offices, airports, bus and train stations. The study suggests new dimensions in research by bringing customer education and customer experience into discussion of services management, highlighting also the implications for the managers and operators of services by giving concluding thoughts and future guidelines at the end.

Keywords

Service Organizations, Customer Education, Transformed Roles, Customer Experience, Service Encounter

1. Introduction

In today's intense competitive environment, managers and operators of service organizations are facing multiple challenges in providing positive and memorable customer service experience. The satisfaction is no more now the key objective of many service customers rather they expect the entertaining experience from the time they spent in whole service journey from the respective organizations for example if you visit any service set up like park, library, hospital, railway station or airport; you don't want just satisfaction from these organizations as an outcome of services rather you want an active participation in the service delivery process and expect positive service experience as an outcome from all the encounters during whole service journey .

The real challenge for the service organizations is that they must understand the changed customer desires and transformed roles with the rapid pace of technology used in all the facets of today's service interactions of highly dynamic customers of public or private organizations. The fruits of long ago stressed "new public management" perspective, which emphasizes to run the public organizations with business like models, are not yet fully capitalized in many public-sector service organizations.

The advancement of technology, social media, smart phones, interactive web portals and the experience seeking consumers have created multiple challenges and at the same time provide also many opportunities for the managers and operators of organizations in service delivery process (Larivière et al., 2017). The high tech and high touch physical, social and virtual spaces demand the participants to perform transformed roles during different service encounters throughout the entire service journey (Lemon & Verhoef, 2016). The role of service organizations in educating the customers to perform their transformed roles in search of positive experience is not been stressed so far by the researchers and the practitioners (Fountain, 2001). The customer education is largely seen an ignored area. There is still a debate that whether the organization should educate the customer or not? In our opinion it is need of the time we should not have fears rather we should fully take on board the customer particularly in services. Businesses, not the public-school systems should educate consumers (McNeal, 1978)

The purpose of current study is to develop a comprehensive model with research hypothesis to show the relationships among customer education, transformed customer roles and customer experience. The study suggests the new dimensions in research by bringing customer education and customer experience into the discussion of the management of service organizations both in private and public sectors. The implications for the managers and operators of service organizations to stress the role of customer education in formulating experience-oriented strategies is also provided by giving the concluding thoughts and future guidelines.

2. Literature Review

This section is mainly divided in two sections the first section is covering all the empirical and conceptual studies cited by top ranked journals including Journal of Marketing, Journal of Business Research, Journal of Services Research, Journal of Services Marketing, European Journal of Marketing; highlighting the concept of customer education by different researchers from time to time. Table 1 is the summary of all the key definition of Customer Education. The first section helped us to conceptualize the concept of "customer education" for our studies. The second section covers all the key empirical studies based on the Construct of customer

education and its various outcomes. The summary of all these studies is provided in table 2. This section helped us to identify the research gaps in the existing body of literature.

Table 1. Definitions of customer education in the literature

Definitions of Customer Education in Literature	Author(s), Year
“Consumer education is assumed to include any attempt to improve the consumer’s ability to act as a purchaser or consumer of those products and services he deems most likely to enhance his well being”.	(Seitz, 1972)
“Consumer education means useful information that will allow consumers to make purchases that provide the greatest satisfaction possible among existing products”	(McNeal, 1978)
"Any purposeful, sustained and organized learning activity that is designed to impart attitudes, knowledge or skills to customers or potential customers by a business or industry. It can range from self-instructional material for a particular product to a formal course related to a product or service”	(Meer, 1984)
“The formal as well as informal sharing of meaningful and timely information between a client and adviser in an empathetic manner.”	(Sharma & Patterson, 1999)
“the extent to which a firm is seen as proactively providing customers with the skills and abilities to utilize information.”	(Burton, 2002)
“customer education is service advisers’ willingness to explain financial concepts and the pros and cons of recommended investment opportunities to their clients”	(Eisingerich & Bell, 2006)
“the companies’ investments in improving customer expertise in relation to the goods and services they market”	(Marker, 2007)
“customer education is the extent to which advisors provide customers with the skills and abilities to utilize information”	(S. J. Bell & Eisingerich, 2007)
“It relies on instructional activities, such as face-to-face seminars, implemented to leverage product usage related skills of a company’s potential or actual customers”	(Aubert, 2008)
“ensemble des activités pédagogiques mises en oeuvre par une entreprise pour développer les connaissances et compétences des consommateurs dans l’usage des produits”	(Aubert & Gotteland, 2010)
“educational initiatives undertaken by a company to better educate, inform, and develop the knowledge and skills of the customers in order to unlock the full value of the products at end use”	(Antonios, 2011)
“It is a process aimed at informing & training customers in order to increase their knowledge levels (basic, general & deep)”	(Bonfanti & Brunetti, 2015)
“Customer education is the extent to which firms are seen as providing customers with the skills and abilities to utilize critical information”	(S. J. Bell, Auh, & Eisingerich, 2017)

In the light of above mentioned definitions we conceptualize the concept of “customer education” for our study as “the sum of organizational communicational efforts in providing informations to impart knowledge, develop skills and build attitude in the customers to prepare and facilitate them in performing the transformed roles in service delivery process for the enhanced outcomes in terms of customer performance and experiences”.

In the next section, we present the context of various researches and studies highlighting the sectors in which the study was conduct, the research respondents for the concerned study and finally the key finds contributing towards the literature in the area of customer education.

Table 2: Empirical studies on “Customer Education” in the literature

Reference	Market Sector	Respondents	Key Findings
Finegan (1990) ...cited by (Aubert 2007) describes the case of an American SME which has implemented a Customer Education (CE) strategy	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Retailing 	Business professional (Retailers)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Increase in Annual Sales • Indirect effect: recruitment of new retailers, increased brand awareness
(Graham, 1990) takes three examples in different sectors to exhort companies to develop Customer Education	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Telecom • Public Relations • Stock Broker 	Business professional and Individuals	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Increased awareness • Increased Sales • Increased brand credibility and confidence • Better understanding of suppliers' jobs & know-how
Filipzack (1991) ...cited by (Aubert 2007) presents evidence from the industrial sector to explain the role of Customer Education and its impact on Customer Behaviour	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Computer Industry • Electronics Industry 	Business professional and Individuals	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Increased customer ability to use a product or service • Increased Customer satisfaction and loyalty • Fewer complaints • Fewer Product returns
K. Bell & Scobie (1992) explain the contribution of Customer Education to new technologies adoption (ATM in a Scottish Bank). They conduct a survey of 205 users and 203 non-users	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Banking Services 	Individuals	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Increased customer ability to use the service • Relieves reticence to adopt new technology
Roush (1999) explains how Home Depot - one of the major DIY distributors in USA – has developed its Customer Education activity	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • DIY Sector 	Individuals	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Better Self-confidence of customers to tackle DIY projects • Increased Sales • Increased Brand awareness and Image
(Aldrich, 2000) explains the role of e-learning in Customer Education	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Software Industry • Electronics goods • Self Service Websites 	Business professional and Individuals	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Positive impact of education /training on the sales and usage, especially for complex products • The advantage of e-learning as a new educational tool. Positive impact on training costs, flexibility and number of customers reached
Goodman, Ward and Broetzmann (2001) ...cited by (Aubert 2007) empirically demonstrate the payoff of Customer Education. They report the results of two quantitative surveys (one on 2149 respondents, the other on a basis of 4000 customers) cited by	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Floors • Car-renting 	Business professional And Individuals	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Significantly lower level of product misuse (floors) • Significantly higher satisfaction • Lower number of complaints from educated customers • Significantly higher intentions to buy (floors) or rent (cars) again

(Aubert, 2007) explains the interest of Customer Education in the field of e-commerce and e-services. He reports evidence from many examples	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> E-commerce: Online Bookseller E-services: Financial Brokers 	Individuals	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> The number of pages visited has more than doubled on websites which offer CE activities 50% of participants of a training session become loyal to the site and 11% buy a product or service (only 5% of non-participants buy a product or service)
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Reference	Market Sector	Respondents	Key Findings
Montandon and Zentriegen (2003) ... cited by (Aubert 2007) present two main applications of CE: E-commerce and Product training. They simultaneously explain the specificities of e-learning for Customer Education. They briefly report the results of three case studies	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Computer Industry Financial services Staffing & employment service Health care 	Business professional And Individuals	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Authors give evidence of the widespread development of e-learning based CE 7 of the 10 biggest US Medicinal drug providers offer such programs 8 of the 10 largest suppliers of medical devices also use these solutions Most hardware suppliers offer courses to their customers (on computer knowledge for example)
Bell & Eisingerich (2007) explore relationship between CE and customer expertise and their combined effects on customer Loyalty. Also explores the moderating effects of customer expertise on relationship between service quality (technical & functional) and loyalty	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Investment Services 	Individuals	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> CE was found to be positively associated with customer expertise The main effect of CE on loyalty was significant The positive effect of technical service quality on customer loyalty was indeed stronger when customer expertise was high The positive relationship between functional service quality and customer loyalty is diminished as customer expertise increases
Eisingerich & Bell (2008) modeled the multifaceted impact of customer education initiatives on the relationship between service quality and trust	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Financial Services 	Individuals	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> customer education had a significant, direct, and positive effect on consumer trust the effect of functional service quality on customer trust was stronger when customer education was high customer education weakened the positive impact of technical service quality on trust
Suh, Greene, Israilov, & Rho (2015) examine the importance of Customer Education as it contributes to enhancing customer loyalty	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Banking services Medical Services 	Individuals	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> customer education has a positive influence on customer expertise Customer education have a positive impact on trust

through perceived service quality	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Beauty Services 		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Customer expertise have a positive effect on technical service quality Customer education can play an important role in building and enhancing customer loyalty.
<p>Bell, Auh, & Eisingerich (2017) The purpose of this research is to understand the circumstances under which Customer Education ties customers more closely to a firm or encourages customers to leave.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Banking Services 	Individuals	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Educating for firm-specific expertise leads to increased loyalty Building market-related expertise may decrease customer loyalty. Customer education—irrespective of how it is directed—significantly increases both the firm-specific and market-related expertise of customers

The findings of studies in table 2 shows that in past the focus of customer education studies was mainly on *Product purchase, Product use, Product safety, Hardware Supplier* given courses on *Computers Knowledge*. Customer education increased *Sale, Brand awareness, Brand Image, Brand Credibility, Brand Confidence, Customer satisfaction, Customer Loyalty, self-confidence, Intentions to buy*. The customer education also decreased *Product Returns, Complaints, Resistance to adopt new technologies, Product Misuse*. However, Customer education in transformed customer role and experience as an outcome is not a focused area by the researchers even some practitioners have already focused in this area. Following are some gaps identified for our study.

2.1 Research Gaps

- Role of Customer Education (CE) in services contexts is not emphasized
- Impact of Customer Education on Transformed Customer Roles (TCR) in services management needs to be focused
- Outcomes of Customer Education in terms of Customer Role Performance (CRP) and Customer experience (CX) is not investigated in services

2.2 Research objective

The core objective of current study is to develop a comprehensive model with research hypothesis to show the relationships among customer education, transformed customer roles and customer experience

3. Methods

The study is based on comprehensive literature review and the participant and field observations of different public organizations in France and Pakistan including public hospitals, public libraries, social security office, tourism offices, district and regional administration offices, airports, bus and train stations and public parks.

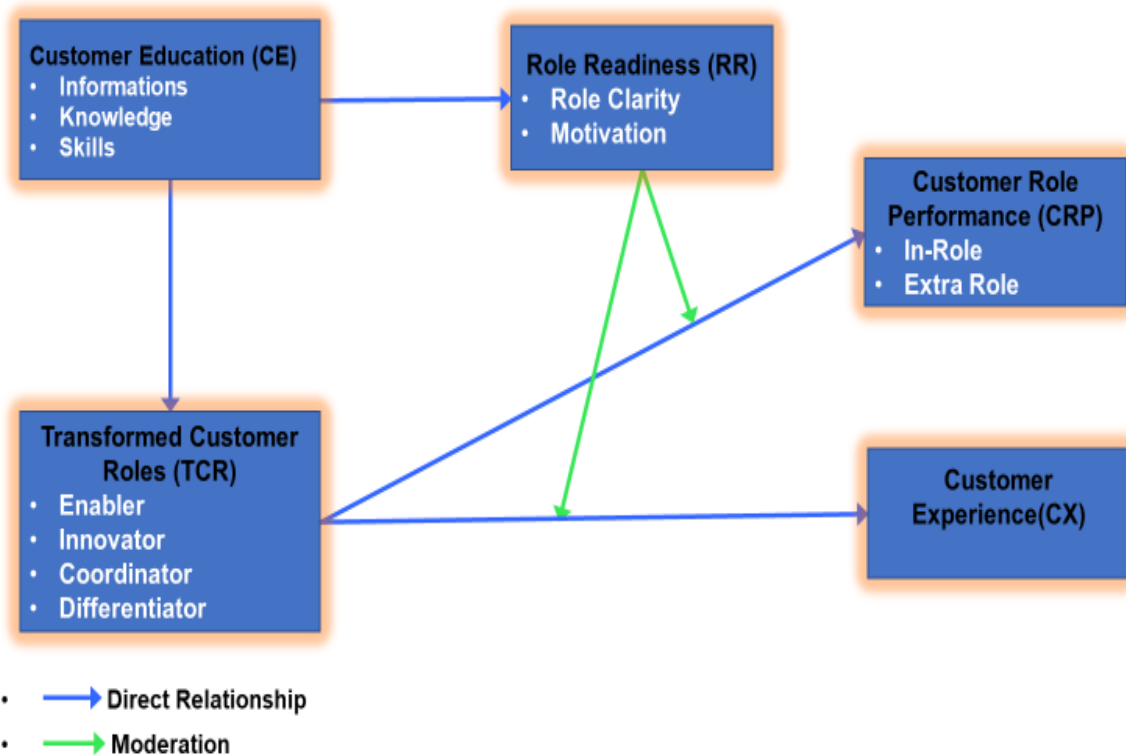
4. Research Model and Hypothesis development

The purpose of Customer education is two-fold. Firstly, it will prepare the customers to perform better in their transformed roles (Enabler, Innovator, Coordinator, Differentiator) as discussed by Larivière et al (2017). Simon et al. (2017) concluded that it is possible to educate customers both in low-interdependency settings (i.e., cafés) as well as higher interdependency (cancer clinic) settings. In certain situations, customers must be involved to co-create the services through their active and higher participation and in these cases customers have vital production roles which if not performed could affect the nature of service outcome (Jo Bitner, Faranda, Hubbert, & Zeithaml, 1997). The services like health care, training or education, until and unless customers do something (for example exercise, follow dietary guidelines, practice or study), the services firm would not be able to ensure a desired service outcome.

Secondly, customer education will facilitate the customers by placing them at higher level of *Role Readiness* (role clarity and motivation). Role clarity is concerned what is expected of them in a specific service encounter, at the same time the educational efforts made by the organization will also increase the motivation of customer which is a fuel for any action to happen (Bettencourt, Ostrom, Brown, & Roundtree, 2002) .

Provision of superior service experience is the principal agenda of the service organizations in their offering (Haeckel, Carbone, & Berry, 2003; Pine & Gilmore, 1999; Pullman & Gross, 2004; Voss, Roth, & Chase, 2008). There are different ways of conceptualizing the construct of customer experience in literature review and is still a debating area to measure it in services sectors for our study we are using the customer experience as an outcome variable therefore it will be measured in totality, so we conceptualize it as “Customer experience is the aggregate of feelings, perceptions and attitudes formed during the entire process of decision making and consumption chain involving an integrated series of interaction with people, objects, processes and environment, leading to cognitive, emotional, sensorial and behavioral responses”.... (Jain et al., 2017). The frequent use of technology in services environment have transformed the roles of experience-oriented service customers (Larivière et al., 2017)

Customers’ expectations need to be understood appropriately by the organization and their role should be defined accordingly in the co-creation process for creating positive experiences (Voss, Roth, and Chase, 2008). Service marketers are required to educate customers enabling them to perform their roles well (Wilson, Zeithaml, Bitner, & Gremler, 2012). The efforts by the organization to educate will play a vital role in helping consumers to understand which behaviors to adopt and how to perform in the service creation and delivery process (Lovelock & Young, 1979). The perspective of “Script and Role theory”, “New public Management” are the theoretical foundations for the current study. Based on the work of (Larivière et al., 2017) we present the following proposed model along with testable hypothesis.



This Proposed Model is Based on the work of Larivière et al., (2017)

Formulation of Hypothesis:

Based on our proposed model we suggest the following hypothesis to be tested empirically

Hypothesis 1:

There is significant positive effect of Customer Education (CE) on Role Readiness (RR) (Role Clarity, Motivation)

Hypothesis 2:

There is significant positive effect of Customer Education (CE) on Transformed Customer Roles (TCR)

Hypothesis 3:

There is significant positive effect of Transformed Customer Roles (TCR) on Customer Role Performance (CRP)

Hypothesis 4:

There is significant positive effect of Transformed Customer Roles (TCR) on Customer Experience (CX)

Hypothesis 5:

The Role Readiness (Role Clarity, Motivation) moderates the relationship between Transformed Customer Roles (TCR) and Customer Role Performance (CRP)

Hypothesis 6:

The Role Readiness (Role Clarity, Motivation) moderates the relationship between Transformed Customer Roles (TCR) and Customer Experience (CX)

5. Discussions

5.1 Implications for Researcher

- The Role of customer education is largely ignored area in the domain of services. The customer education was largely used previously in tangible goods like how to fabricate the furniture items or safety precautions provided along with electric and electronic households items or the traditional printed material on food item describing the ingredients and calories and the warnings with medicines. It is therefore recommended that the customer education should be focused by the researcher as key research area in facilitating the customers to perform their transformed role in a more better way and getting the positive and memorable experiences while interacting with the service organizations throughout the service journey.
- The operationalization of the concept of customer education and its relations with other established constructs in services domain yet needs the attention of academicians which will help to bring new avenues of knowledge creations particularly in this hi-tech and hi-touch experience-oriented consumer society. We see lot of technological changes in the health sector where the customer role is not passive now rather he or she has to play active and diversified transformed roles particularly in chronic diseases like diabetics, hypertension, tuberculosis or cancer. Health care services is very rich area for the academicians to make valuable contributions(Berry & Bendapudi, 2007)
- The role of other moderators like perceived risk, feedback provided to the customer on their performance may also be included in the empirical study.

5.2 Implications for Managers

- The managers and operators of services can develop effective and pertinent strategies for educating their customers, for example they can make effective use of technology by creating online customer account through which they can proactively educate them what roles they are expected to perform at various stages of service journey. It was experienced that the French bus and railway company always sends the messages for any change of schedule or cancellation of some specific service well before in time with possible guidelines to ensure better experiences
- The role of front desk employees is utmost important in delivery of services, they can be trained in such a manner that they should not only be acting as service provider rather they should be able to educate the customer to perform their roles appropriately. This needs organization to provide with ample time opportunity to their front desk employees. It was observed that the French post offices, tourist's offices, bus stations, students visa and immigration offices have trained their front-line employees in such an effective manner that they can appropriately educate and guide the respective visitors on all the possible situations and scenarios which customer may face during the service delivery process.

- The managers can divide the customer Journey into three segments i.e. preservice, during service and post service delivery phases. For each phase the organizations can explore the opportunities and ways to develop the educating strategies.
- When customers have better understanding of their role by the help of education received by the organization, they will perform their role faster and smoother which will possibly be increasing the overall speed of service for rest of the customers also; as it was observed and shown in Fig 1 that flight operations at Islamabad airport are often delayed as on daily basis some passengers don't have "OK TO Board" stamp for flights departing to Dubai which is not ensured by some passengers because of not properly educated by respective travel agents.



Fig 2: Benazir Bhutto International Airport, Islamabad

- The educated customer will have lesser or no confusion about their role which will have lesser number of complaints for the organizations will ensure hazardless provision of services; as shown in Fig 2 the smooth flow of passengers at Marseille Railway stations is ensured by French Railway with help of a deputed person whose job is to educate various passengers on different issues like using automatic machines for purchase of appropriate metro tickets and how to switch over different metro and bus services for their journey.



Fig 2. Marseille Railway Station in south of France

- The educated customer with the passage of time may become expert customer and these expert customers can help fellow customers also at various stages of service journey like helping other how to use automatic vending machines as observed at different bus and railway stations while customer hesitate to purchase ticket using machines and other expert customers help them in this regard
- These expert customers some time may provide emotional and social support to inexperienced or newly appointed front desk employees in providing the services.

6. Conclusion

It is quite clear that researchers and practitioners of service organizations should give importance to customer education as a key research area and a very effective tool in services. The service professionals and operators of private and public sector should timely invest in customer education to facilitate them in assuming transformed roles; otherwise there could be more heavy costs of ignorance they have to face. In our opinion customer education plays a dual role in service creation and delivery process; on one side customer education helps customer to understand and perform their transformed role in a better way and on other side it places the customer in higher role readiness i.e. it eliminates the confusion and uncertainty in customer mind during the service delivery process by bringing more role clarity and customer educations also motivate the customers in performing their transformed roles. The Proposed model is developed based on literature review and field observations, therefore it needs to be tested empirically on the basis of quantitative data obtained from real life service organizations to establish its validity and reliability for further use in various services settings.

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