



ARTICLE

The role of frontline employees in customer engagement



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Abstract The current competitive climate paves the way for a change in the management of the customer portfolio by attempting to improve the efficiency and profitability of the relational approach. Accordingly, the study of the company–customer relationship incorporates the concept of customer engagement. This new concept suggests that transactional criteria (repurchasing, cross-selling, level of use) are insufficient to assess the profitability of each customer. Therefore, it is necessary to consider customers' non-transactional behaviour, including word of mouth and blogging, in order to gain a more accurate idea of the current and future worth of each customer.

In line with the previous ideas, this research analyses the role of frontline employees, who, the majority of the time, are regarded as spokespeople for the company in the company–customer interaction, as well as being influential in the level of satisfaction and engagement. This interaction is vital in the case of a service failure or complaint management.

The contribution of this study is justified by the originality of the concept analyzed and the lack of any previous works dealing specifically with the possible relationship between the actions of employees and customer engagement. Furthermore, it analyses whether the fact that a customer has made a complaint or not has any effect on the causal relationships proposed. The theoretical and practical implications are included in the final part of the paper.

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PALABRAS CLAVE

Captación de clientes;
Empleado de atención al cliente;

El papel de los empleados de atención al cliente en el compromiso de los clientes

Resumen El clima competitivo actual allana el camino hacia el cambio en la gestión de la cartera de clientes tratando de mejorar la eficacia y la rentabilidad del enfoque relacional. En consonancia, el estudio de la relación empresa-cliente incorpora el concepto de «compromiso del cliente». Este nuevo concepto sugiere que los criterios transaccionales (readquisición, venta

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Satisfacción;
Teléfono móvil

cruzada, nivel de uso) son insuficientes para evaluar la rentabilidad de cada cliente. Por lo tanto, hay que considerar el comportamiento no transaccional de los clientes, incluido el boca a boca y la publicación en blogs, para obtener una idea más exacta del valor actual y futuro de cada cliente.

De acuerdo con las ideas expuestas, en esta investigación se analiza el papel de los empleados de atención al cliente, que la mayor parte del tiempo se consideran portavoces de la empresa en la interacción empresa-cliente y, asimismo, influyentes en el nivel de satisfacción y compromiso. Esta interacción es fundamental en el caso de errores en el servicio o de gestión de reclamaciones.

La contribución de este estudio se justifica por la originalidad del concepto analizado y la falta de obras previas dedicadas específicamente a la posible relación entre las acciones de los empleados y el compromiso de los clientes. Además, se analiza si el hecho de que un cliente haya interpuesto una reclamación o no tiene algún efecto sobre las relaciones causales propuestas. En la última parte del artículo se incluyen las implicaciones teóricas y prácticas.

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Introduction

Companies have traditionally paid much attention to the transactional behaviour of consumers (*repurchasing, cross-selling, level of use, length of the relationship, etc.*) as these actions had an immediate effect on the sales volumes and results. However, the current competitive climate favours a new approach to managing the company–customer relationship which incorporates non-transactional behaviour (word-of-mouth, blogging or referrals, co-creation, amongst others), which can have a strong impact on company results, even if these are not registered with immediate effect. This has led to the inclusion of a new concept in specialized literature (customer engagement) which has become a prominent issue in the areas of both relational marketing and consumer behaviour. Research on customer engagement has focused its attention on analyzing customer profitability, using both their transactional and non-transactional behaviour (Kumar et al., 2010; Van Doorn et al., 2010).

This concept, considered to be one of the top research priorities by the *Marketing Science Institute*, emerged in marketing literature as an evolution of the relational paradigm. It is based on the continual interactions that firms maintain with their customers, and those between customers and other consumers, which affect non-transactional behaviour (Vivek, 2009). The peculiarity of these behaviours is that they are voluntary (Mollen & Wilson, 2010), and although they do not generate immediate revenue for the company, they help reinforce the company image and can influence future purchase decisions of other consumers, which could boost profitability and the value of the business over the long-term.

Engagement can be seen as an indicator that reflects the level of customer involvement and connection with the products, services and activities of the firm (Verhoef, Reinartz, & Krafft, 2010). Therefore, an engaged customer is the result of feeling sufficiently satisfied and from the company–customer interaction itself (Hollebek, 2011).

This interaction is of particular interest in services marketing. The literature highlights that in this interactive process those employees who are in direct contact with customers play a vital role (Berry, 1981; Gounaris, 2008;

Paswan, Pelton, & True, 2005). This is due to the fact that employees often act as the spokespeople of the company and take an active role in delivering the service, providing information, showing customers how to make better use of the service acquired, process complaints or claims, apologize, propose solutions or alternative uses, and generate feedback, all of which is of great importance for the present and future value of the company. Aspects such as training, actions and motivation of employees can therefore help explain why certain customers are willing to become engaged customers.

However, the novelty of the concept of customer engagement and the relative shortfall of specific literature explain the lack of previous research on the subject and provide justification for this study. Our work, which is of exploratory nature, seeks to analyze the role of frontline employees in the level of customer engagement. This study is of interest to both academics and practitioners given that, as Seltzer, Gardner, Bichard, and Callinson (2012) indicate, frontline employees often act as public relations, by being the ambassadors of the company when they communicate and interact with external audiences (e.g., customers). The actions taken by these employees and their responses to customer enquiries are one of the most effective communication tools. In fact, consumers sometimes trust the messages conveyed by these employees more than any other source of communication (Van Laer & De Ruyter, 2010).

In this sense, our research analyzes the role of frontline employees to increase the perceived level of customer satisfaction when using a service (in this case, mobile phone operators). This study represents the first empirical research to tackle this matter. In a second step, we examine whether those customers who are dissatisfied have made a complaint or not, and whether making a complaint moderates the customer–employee interaction. In order to do this we consider engagement a specific construct that simultaneously includes non-transactional attributes such as co-creation or word-of-mouth (Bolton, 2011; Van Doorn, 2011).

Specifically, we wish to examine

- Whether employees, in their roles as spokespeople of the company, affect (i) the level of customer

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