

ASSESSING CUSTOMER ORIENTATION IN PUBLIC, NON-PROFIT ORGANIZATIONS: A PROFILE OF OHIO STATE UNIVERSITY EXTENSION

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Abstract

The purpose of the study was to describe the customer orientation profile of Ohio State University Extension (OSU Extension). The sample for the study consisted of Extension personnel ($n = 265$) at the county level. An evaluative framework was utilized to describe the organizational customer orientation profile in four dimensions: Definition, Sensitivity, Measurement, and Implementation. Additionally, the level of commitment to Customer Service and attitude toward Continuous Quality Improvement (CQI) were analyzed. A mail survey was used to collect the research data. A slightly high level of customer orientation was found, portraying the organization (OSU Extension) as extroverted, proactive, formal, and action-oriented. A slightly high level of commitment to customer service and a slightly positive attitude toward CQI were exhibited by OSU Extension personnel. A statistically significant association was found between customer service and customer orientation, and also between customer orientation and attitude toward CQI, job title and gender. Paraprofessionals had a higher customer orientation than professionals and support staff. Females had a higher customer orientation than males.

Introduction

Social marketing involves a new approach to planning, implementing, controlling, and evaluating programs. This philosophy is considered a process which determines needs and wants of clientele, develops and implements programs to meet those needs, and evaluates program success (Tyson, 1993; Brown, 1994; Kotler & Fox, 1995).

Of the four possible marketing orientations identified in the literature regarding the objectives of any marketing plan, the most recent and progressive is customer orientation. Customer orientation is the planning of products and services based on customer needs rather than organizational needs. Customer orientation focuses on customer expectations and seeks to satisfy customers while preserving high quality standards (Tyson, 1993; Safrit & Gibbons, 1994; Kotler & Andreasen, 1995; Nwankwo, 1995).

Customer-oriented organizations focus their programs on precise customers, seeking to satisfy particular needs and desires. Customer-oriented organizations design and deliver their products and services with the requirement of meeting customer preferences. The characteristics of a customer-oriented public organization have been identified as: (a) focusing on client needs, (b) defining the organizational business in terms of customer needs and wants, (c) aiming for specific groups of people, (d) assessing customer satisfaction as the main organizational goal, and (e) developing an integrated marketing plan (Lamb, 1986; Kotler & Andreasen, 1995; Nwankwo, 1995). Although little is known about how to develop customer orientation, the aforementioned characteristics should guide any effort in this direction.

An evaluative framework for analyzing customer orientation in private, public, and/or non-profit organizations has been proposed by Nwankwo (1995). Within this framework four institutional dimension are evaluated: (a)

definition, (b) sensitivity, (c) measurement, and (d) implementation. Definition is related to how the organization envisions the needs of its customers. Sensitivity is the extent to which an organization is able to scan and interpret its environment. Measurement is a planning process to include, implement, and monitor customer goals, objectives, and related performance. Implementation consists of translating the customer-oriented strategy into practice. Nwankwo's evaluative framework has programing and evaluation implications for administrators and policy makers. The framework guides the determination of an organization's customer orientation profile revealing whether the organization has a low or high orientation toward its customers and how it performs in each of the different dimensions. According to this model organizations can be portrayed as extroverted or introverted in the definition dimension, proactive or reactive in the sensitivity dimension, formal or informal in the measurement dimension, and action-oriented or statement-of-intent in the implementation dimension (Nwankwo, 1995).

Differences between traits, attitudes, and activities for gender that can affect customer orientation have been recently reported in the literature. According to Hoyer and Macinnis (1997), in Western societies, males are guided by "agentic goals" which stress mastery, self-assertiveness and self-efficacy, while women have been guided more by "communal goals" of affiliation and promoting harmonious relations with others. Furthermore, men are more competitive, independent, externally motivated, and more willing to take risks. In contrast, women tend to be more cooperative, interdependent, intrinsically motivated, and risk adverse (Hoyer & Macinnis, 1997).

Purpose and Objectives

This study was designed to describe the level of customer orientation, commitment to customer service, and attitude toward Continuous Quality

Improvement (CQI) of Ohio State University Extension personnel. The study was guided by the following objectives:

1. Describe the level of customer orientation of Ohio State University Extension as perceived by their personnel;
2. Describe the level of commitment to customer service exhibited by Ohio State University Extension personnel;
3. Describe the attitude toward Continuous Quality Improvement (CQI) exhibited by Ohio State University Extension personnel;
4. Describe personal characteristics of Ohio State University Extension personnel: job title, program area, gender, age, and length of employment;
5. Describe the relationships between level of customer orientation with level of commitment to customer service, attitude toward Continuous Quality Improvement (CQI), and personal characteristics, and
6. Determine the differences in level of customer orientation according to job title, program area, and gender.

Methodology

Descriptive correlational research was used in this study. The target population consisted of all Ohio State University Extension personnel. The accessible population was Ohio State University Extension personnel distributed in 88 counties ($N=834$). A sample was drawn from the population ($n=265$), composed of the following three personnel categories: professional ($n=98$), paraprofessionals ($n=95$), and support staff ($n=71$) using stratified random sampling (Krejcie & Morgan, 1970). Professionals included Extension agents and/or county chairs; paraprofessionals included program assistants and nutrition

educators; and support staff included typists, clerks, and secretaries.

The questionnaire used to gather data from the sample consisted of four parts. For Part I a modified version of the "Customer Orientation Assessment" instrument developed by Nwankwo (1995) was used to describe the level of customer orientation of *Ohio* State University Extension. Nwankwo's customer orientation assessment instrument is divided into four sections with each section representing one of the dimensions of customer orientation. Parts II and III focused on commitment to Customer Service and attitude toward Continuous Quality Improvement (CQI). Parts I and II consisted of Likert-type scales and Part III used a semantic differential scale. Part IV consisted of five demographic questions regarding job title, program area, gender, age and length of employment at OSU Extension. Content validity was established by a panel of experts ($n=7$). Face validity was established by a field test group ($n=7$). The reliability of the instrument was determined using a pilot test group, consisting of a representative sample of the target population ($n=20$). Cronbach's alpha measure of internal consistency for Part I was $r = .94$, for Part II, $r = .93$, and for Part III, $r = .96$.

Data were collected by mail questionnaire using a modification of the procedure recommended by Salant and Dilman (1994). The survey was conducted during a two-month period from May through June, 1997. The overall response rate for the study was 80%. A Chi-square test of independence was used for the demographic variables of the study to compare respondents and non-respondents. Since no statistically significant differences were found between respondents and non-respondents on four of the five demographic variables, the results of this study were generalized to the population of Ohio Extension employees and to the sample drawn.

Data were analyzed by the SPSS Base 7.5 (1997), computer program. Descriptive statistics

including means, medians, modes, standard deviations, ranges, frequencies, and percentages were calculated for objectives 1 through 4, and 6. Pearson's product-moment, Eta, and point-biserial correlations coefficients were calculated to describe relationships in objective number 5.

An analysis of variance was performed for testing differences among job title and program area groups on the variable customer orientation. A t-test for means difference between gender and customer orientation profile was also performed.

Results

Customer Orientation Profile

As illustrated in Table 1, the overall mean score for customer orientation was 95.80 ($SD=15.46$), indicating a slightly high level of customer orientation for OSU Extension personnel.

The possible range for the mean score on customer orientation is between 28 and 140. In the survey paraprofessionals had the highest mean score for customer orientation. The mean scores for the four sections of Part I of the instrument regarding the different dimensions of customer orientation are represented in Table 2.

The organization (OSU Extension) can be portrayed as extroverted, proactive, formal, and action-oriented. The highest mean score in the implementation dimension, suggests that the strongest characteristic of people inside the organization is their ability to translate customer-oriented strategies into practice.

Commitment to Customer Service

The mean score on a six-point Likert-type scale was 58.97 ($SD=11.62$), indicating a slightly high level of commitment to customer service exhibited by OSU Extension personnel. Scores could range between 14 and 84.

Table 1. Mean Score Values for Customer Orientation According; to Job Title

Personal Characteristics	Customer Orientation Profile		
	<u>M</u>	SD	Min.-Max.
Job Title			
Professional (<u>n</u> =76)	92.31	15.47	52-125
Paraprofessional (<u>n</u> =72)	99.27	15.64	62-130
Support Staff (<u>n</u> =60)	96.05	14.48	66-126
Total (<u>n</u>=208)	95.80	15.46	52-130

Note. The possible range for the mean score on customer orientation is Min=28 and Max=140.

Table 2. Dimensions of Customer Orientation of Osu Extension Personnel

Dimension	<u>n</u>	<u>M</u>	SD	Min.-Max.
Definition	208	24.00	4.59	10-35
Sensitivity	208	23.11	4.31	09-34
Measurement	208	23.17	4.83	10-34
Implementation	208	25.52	3.86	13-35

Note. The possible range for the mean score in each of the dimensions is Min.=7 and Max.=35.

Attitude Toward CQI

The mean score on the semantic differential scale was 49.00 (SD=8.44), indicating a slightly positive attitude toward CQI exhibited by OSU Extension personnel. Scores could range between 10 and 70.

Personal Characteristics of OSU Extension Personnel

Of the three group categories of job title (n = 208), professionals (36%) represented the highest proportion of responding OSU Extension personnel. In the sample, program area had two modal categories represented by Family and Consumer Science (27%), and 4-H Youth Development (27%). Eighty percent of the respondents were females. The mean age of the

respondents was 42 years (SD= 10.4) with a mean length of employment of nine years (SD=7.9).

Relationships Between Customer Orientation and, Customer Service, COI, and Personal Characteristics

Table 3 presents the correlation coefficients calculated to describe possible relationships between customer orientation and the independent variables of the study.

A statistically significant, positive, very strong association was found between level of customer orientation and commitment to customer service. Statistically significant positive, low associations were found between level of customer orientation and attitude toward CQI, job title, and gender.

Table 3. Relationships between customer orientation and customer service, CQI, and selected personal characteristics.

Variables	Correlation Coefficients
Customer Service ^a	.77*
CQI ^a	.28*
Job Title ^b	.29*
Program Area ^b	.21
Gender ^c	.25*
Age ^a	-.02
Years of Employment ³	-.11

^aPearson product-moment, ^b Eta, ^c Point-biserial, * $p < .05$

Differences in Customer Orientation According to Job Title, Program Area and Gender

In testing for differences among job title groups for customer orientation, the analysis of variance revealed a statistically significant difference between mean scores for paraprofessionals and professionals. Paraprofessionals had a higher mean customer orientation score ($M=99$, $SD=16$) than professionals ($M=92$, $SD=15$). The highest score on customer orientation was for the Family and Consumer Science group ($M=99$, $SD=14$), however no significant differences were found among program areas groups. For gender, a t-test for independence showed a statistically significant difference between group means on the variable customer orientation, revealing that females had a higher customer orientation ($M=98$, $SD=15$) than males ($M=88$, $SD=16$).

Conclusions, Implications and Recommendations

From the analysis of the findings, four major conclusions are drawn: a) the overall level of customer orientation of OSU Extension is slightly high, revealing the organization's positive orientation toward its customers and their needs, b) paraprofessionals have a higher customer orientation profile than professionals and support

staff, c) females have a higher customer orientation profile than males, and d) OSU Extension personnel have a slightly high level of commitment to customer service and a slightly positive attitude toward CQI.

Customer Oriented Focus

Due to the importance of developing a customer orientation in public, non-profit organizations, especially in Extension, and to assure a competitive advantage for the organization's future, an effort has to be made to raise the level of customer orientation of OSU Extension employees. A positive customer orientation can be accomplished by integrating in the design, implementation, and control of programs a customer-oriented focus that leads to customer-oriented strategies, and to satisfied customers and loyalty. Therefore, training programs for employees in the current techniques of needs assessment, program development, and evaluation including a substantial customer focus need to be designed (Tyson, 1993; Safrit & Gibbons, 1994; Brown, 1994; Kotler & Andreasen, 1995; Nwankwo, 1995).

Organizational Groups

Different job title groups have distinct points of view about the organization, its internal

processes in developing products and services, and also on how the organization conducts business. A focused approach should be used with each of the groups, addressing their particular concerns about the processes and programs in which the organization is involved. Extension's commitment to customer and quality orientation could be broadened. Taking into account job title, program area, and gender differences could be the key for the successful delivery of instructional programs and materials, addressing different group interests and demands. In this effort a quality approach must be utilized in order to maintain a competitive advantage of the organization by creating customer satisfaction through the quality and superior value of its products and services (Day, 1994; Miles, Russell & Arnold, 1995).

Future Needs

According to a customer orientation approach, organizations, such as the Cooperative Extension Service, need to identify customer needs and desires, develop services to meet those needs, promote those services, and evaluate the results (Self, 1987; Nwankwo, 1995). Importance should be given to customer research and the development of instruments with different customer-related items that could evaluate the perceptions of clientele about Extension products and services. Customer satisfaction research is also one tool that can be used to ensure a long and advantageous existence in the educational arena. Customer satisfaction research has two basic objectives: understanding customer expectations and understanding how well an organization is satisfying customer needs and wants (Biggs, Gordon & Zimmerman, 1995). A next step for having a better understanding of Extension customers is to conduct customer satisfaction surveys as an effort to assess the performance of the services from the customer perspective. The results of customer satisfaction research could then be compared to the American Customer Satisfaction Index (ACSI), which is a type of customer-based measurement system for

evaluating the performance of firms, industries, the economic sector, and national economies; especially for services within public administration and governmental agencies (Andreassen, 1994; Fornell et al., 1996).

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