

The Existing Systems of Customer Relations Activities in Bungoma County Referral Hospital

*Simiyu Judith, Dr. William Sakataka & Wasike Edward Wanyonyi
Mount Kenya University, Kitale Campus*

Abstract

Customer Relations as a process, is taking a Centre stage as a management function in many corporate and government institutions. The purpose of this study was to describe the existing systems of Customer Relations Activities at Bungoma County Referral Hospital. The study adopted a descriptive survey design that was used to investigate existing Customer Relations Activities in the performance of Bungoma County Referral Hospital. Main data collection instruments were structured and self-administered questionnaires and structured interviews. This technique was used because questioning gave the respondents the required opportunity to answer the questions willingly and with an open mind. Data was analyzed both quantitatively and qualitatively in response to study questions. The analyzed data is presented in a report through use of tables, charts and narrative. The study found out that cases of employee relations, community relations and the use of media were commonly employed by the hospital as the major forms of Customer Relations Activities. The study recommends that the government should avail Customer Relations Officers to the hospital so as to aid in effective implementation of the available forms of Customer Relations Activities. This study faced two major constraints: first, the respondents were not quick in responding to the administered questionnaires given to the nature of the questioning which somehow touched on personal life and secondly, some of the records containing relevant information for the study were not accessible hence, the researcher gave respondents more time and worked with the available information.

Keywords: *Customer relations, Bungoma County Referral Hospital*

Introduction

Customer Relations (CR) as a process is taking a centre stage as a management function in many corporate and government institutions. However, hurdles brought about by institutional organizational structures pose a challenge to service delivery and customer satisfaction. Customer Relations can be conceptualized as a strategic communication process that builds mutually beneficial relationships between organizations and their customers/clients. As a process, it can evoke ideas of control and top-down, one-way communications it plays a role in helping to bring together organizations and individuals with their key stakeholders, in particular the customers or consumers of their products/services.

Customer Relations is the practice of managing the spread of information between

an individual or an Organization and the deemed customers or consumers of the services/ products (Grunig & Hunt, 1984). On their part, Seitel and Fraser (2007) further state that customer relations entails a situation where an organization or individual gains the exposure to their audiences by way of using topics of customer/ public interest and news items that do not require direct payment. Therefore, good customer relations often persuade the public, investors, partners, employees, and other stakeholders to maintain a certain point of view about it, its leadership, products, or of political decisions. Common activities of customer relations include speaking at conferences, winning industry awards, working with the press, and employee communication (Rubel & Rubel, 2007).

Customer Relations services are sought after by many organizations, companies and prominent individuals because of the benefits that are perceived to accrue from its application. A Customer Relations specialist communicates with the customers, public and media on their behalf in order to present them in the best light. This in turn, enables clients to have a good reputation about the organization, company or a prominent individual. Customer Relations services also help organizations and individuals stand out from the crowd and attract attention of both the public and media as well as create a two-way communication for effectiveness.

International Public Relation (2012), states that, Customer Relations is the way organizations, companies and individuals communicate with their customer/ consumers, the public and media. Therefore, a Public Relation officer or a Customer Relation specialist is the one who communicates with the target audience directly or indirectly through media with the objective of creating and maintaining a positive image and creating a strong relationship with the audience as far as the business is concerned. The communication process can take place through channels such as press releases or statements, newsletters and other newsprints such as newspapers, public appearances where the specialists together with the management hold meetings with the customers. The utilization of the World Wide Web mainly through the company's websites and other medium such as Facebook, twitter and WhatsApp among others are also applied.

Most historians believe that Customer Relations was established first in the United States by Ivy Lee (1877-1934) or Edward Bernays (1891-1995) and then spread internationally to other parts of the world. Many American companies with Public Relations (PR) and CR departments spread the practice to Europe through the creation of European subsidiaries. This was commonly evidenced immediately after the European/French Industrial Revolution (PRSA, 2009).

Regionally, Cases of Customer relations activities were experienced in South African Republic and most of the West African states where the local manufacturers of products such as packed coffee (Nescafe), Aerial and Persil soaps and oils have invested heavily in advertisements and promotional services so as to lure customers in buying their goods and services. For instance, the Multi Choice, which is a giant digital television broadcaster has invested so much in Customer Relations Activities by offering free channel to viewers who have subscribed to the basic bouquet and also has an operation hot line for 24 hours a day 7 days a week where customers can register their queries and have their issues sorted out within the shorted time possible. In Rwanda during the Rwandan

Genocide, forms of propaganda and media were used to lobby and rally the Hutus behind the killing of the Tutsi who were considered unwanted coded as “Chinitse”. In Tanzania, the then President, the late Mwalimu Julius Nyerere employed the use of Customer Relations Activities to rally support for his Ujamaa ideologies that saw the Tanzanian moving from their homes to live in Ujamaa villages. This was a success as the ideology was accepted leading to ease realization of the government’s goals and objectives.

In Kenya, most companies and organizations have greatly embarked on heavy promotion and advertisement services that aim at increasing the customer reserves. Most governmental departments and even non-governmental organizations are embracing customer relations activities majorly to publicize their services/products to their deemed customers. Cases of customer care desks, front office management personnel, company secretaries and advertisement officers often referred to as sales and marketing officers are common in most businesses and organizations today. In fact, most of the higher learning institutions have career course in sales and marketing and Public Relations which aim at training the personnel in customer relations skills and knowledge. It was this in mind that this study aimed at establishing the impact of customer relations activities on the performance in public institutions.

The Research Gap

As established by Ogbna, (2007), most scholars have focused so much on customer relations and its deemed importance or impacts on the performance of the profit making business/organizations. However, most of the governmental organizations are nonprofit making as they offer services or goods to their deemed customers on a cost sharing model where the government subsidizes the cost of the services to the customers/consumers. In his study, Ogbna suggests that a similar study needed to be established so as to categorically establish some of the importance of Customer Relations Activities on the performance of public institutions to which this study endeavored to.

Statement of the Problem

Customer Relations services are sought after by many organizations, companies and prominent individuals because of the benefits that are perceived to accrue from its application. A Customer Relations specialist communicates with the customers, public and media on their behalf in order to present them in the best light. This helps their clients create and maintain a good reputation about the organization, company or a prominent individual. Customer Relations services also help them stand out from the crowd and attract attention of both the public and media as well as create a two-way communication in an organization.

International Public Relation (2012) defines Customer Relations as the way

organizations, companies and individuals communicate with their customer/consumers, the public and media. A Public Relation or a Customer Relation specialist is the person who communicates with the target audience directly or indirectly through media with an objective to create and maintain a positive image and create a strong relationship with the audience. The communication process can take place through channels such as press releases or statements, newsletters and other newsprints such as in newspapers, public appearances where the specialists together with the management hold meetings with the customers answering some of their queries. The utilization of the World Wide Web mainly through the company's websites and other medium such as Facebook, twitter and WhatsApp among others also apply.

As articulated by International Public Relation report (2012), a positive public image created by the Customer Relations helps create a strong relationship with the customers who in turn increase the sales and/or performance of any given institution or organization. Besides attracting public attention, Customer Relation helps in establishing a good reputation which has a direct influence on the sales as well as the overall institutional image. A Customer Relations specialist therefore, plays an important role in the times of crisis. In most situations the direct and indirect consumers of services will not take any chance and without delay, they will choose or opt for an alternative facility which they believe offers better or respected services. In times of crisis, any public institution needs someone who reacts quickly and efficiently to minimize the damage on the overall performance. This involves the ability to maintain and retain the existing and other new customers so as to maximally consume the available services with no doubts whatsoever and ability to think and act fast under pressure as well as communicate well with the client/customer, public and media. Such a person is a Customer Relations specialist, (International Public Relation, 2012). This study sought to identify the existing forms of Customer Relations Activities being used at Bungoma County Referral Hospital.

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this study was to find out how Customer Relations Activities can impact on the performance of Public Institutions such as Bungoma County Referral Hospital.

Research Questions

The study sought to answer the following questions:

1. What systems exist for service delivery in Bungoma County Referral Hospital?
2. What is the overall performance of Bungoma County Referral Hospital?
3. To what extent has Customer Relations Activities contributed to the hospital's overall performance?

Literature Review

About.com (2014) says that Customer Relations include promotional activities that work to create a strong customer image of the company. Customer Relations Activities include helping the customers to understand the company and its products. Common activities of customer relations include speaking at conferences, winning industry awards, working with the press, and employee communication (Rubel & Rubel, 2007). By using proven Customer Relations tools and activities, the organization can promote positive attitudes and behaviors towards the business that will help convert interested consumers into customers of the company's/business products. Customer Relations tools are very cost-effective, and often give the company's Customer Relations' specialist a greater degree of control than more broadly targeted advertising campaigns. The State of Queensland report (2014), proposes the following Customer Relations tools to build the business's reputation:

Media Relations. These focus on circulating messages through media on how business is managed and portrayed. The business media tools might include releasing media statements and fact sheets, offering on-site media tours to encourage journalists to report positively about the business or institution, and using social media such as Facebook, Google and others, to get the attention of journalists and track those journalists who report in the institutions/business market.

Advertorials. These are advertisements in the form of news stories or reviews in newspapers, magazines and other related articles. Advertorials allow organizations to associate with credible advertising agents. Many businesses employ advertising or marketing professionals to help in developing their products/ services through televisions, radios, newspapers and many others.

Social media. Social media lets the business bypass the media and go straight to the deemed customers. Using social networking sites such as Facebook and Twitter allows organizations to follow and be followed by journalists, drive web traffic, manage issues by responding quickly to criticisms or negative perceptions, and increase exposure for the business.

Newsletters. Print or emailed newsletters have long been a good way to promoting organizations and enhancing communication with customers and keeping them informed of new product and services. Regular newsletters can strengthen the personal connections with customers and reflect the business brands and personality.

Brochures and catalogues. 'Take home' or mail-out brochures or catalogues can help keep the expected and esteemed customers thinking about the business and its products and services. Properly designed brochures and catalogues give customers confidence in the business and what it sells, and help drive customers to institutions/ company's website. Information contained in business brochures and catalogues can be effectively reworked for the business's website, helping it do business online.

Business events. Events are opportunities for business people to gain exposure for their businesses, promote new products or services and make sure accurate information reaches targeted customers. From a sales point of view, events are a chance to counter customer doubts and build customer confidence. These can also help the business research its market and competitors, in order to build a mailing list. Trade shows are an opportunity for businesses to compete in the industry and share information with people in similar lines of work.

Speaking engagements. Speaking at events where customers are likely to attend helps position the business as a leader or innovator in the field of specialization. As a business owner or leader, building the reputation as an expert also builds the reputation of the business and draws new customers. Events are valuable promotional opportunities even if an organization does not have top billing as a speaker. The business will build reputation simply by having its name or logo on the event listing, or delivering a presentation about a new product or innovation.

Sponsorships or partnerships. Partnerships and sponsorships are good for business. Supporting a not-for-profit cause can help build feelings of goodwill towards the business. Community partnerships may involve an exchange of funds or in-kind benefits to grow a local community organization in return for benefits that promote the business reputation. Partnerships can help consumers identify the brand with good business practice and good ethics.

Employee relations. The business staff are ambassadors for the business and its brand. Many larger businesses conduct employee relations, that is, by building a business culture and team relationships by sharing information, promoting involvement and instilling a sense of pride in business achievement. This can improve teamwork, staff retention and productivity.

Community relations. Building good relationships with members of the community where the business is, helps build customer loyalty. It is good always to find out where the customers in the community live by collecting postcodes at point of sale. Engaging local stakeholders and decision makers help build the business's profile and level of influence, helping it to attract more customers through word- of-mouth and ensuring the business interests are factored into community decision making.

As established by Ogbna, (2007), most scholars have focused so much on public relations and its deemed importance or impacts on the performance of the profit making organizations. However, most of the governmental organizations are nonprofit making as most of them offer services or goods to their deemed customers on a cost sharing model where the government subsidizes the cost of the services to the customers/consumers. In his publication, Ogbna suggests that a similar study needed to be established so as to categorically establish some of the importance of customer relations activities on the performance of public institutions to which this study endeavored to.

Methodology

Kothari (2004) describes research design as “the conceptual structure within which research is conducted, constituting the blueprint for the collection, measurement and analysis of data”. This study employed a descriptive research design, majorly survey which focused on establishing customer relations activities on the performance of a public health institution, Bungoma District Hospital. The study focused on establishing existing forms of Customer Relation Activities in Bungoma County Referral Hospital. This study design was chosen as it vividly examines the conditions in terms of knowledge of the residents, their attitudes, beliefs and perceptions on Customer Relations Activities. The population of this study was drawn from 2,783

Bungoma town households who had lived in the area for more than 2 years and only those who were above 16 years of age. In descriptive study, quantitative strategies are frequently used to calculate the sample size in order to make qualitative inferences about the parent population with a given level of confidence. According to Silverman (2013), the larger the sample size is the more precise the estimation is. However, more subjects in the study also lead to a higher cost. Therefore, the research needed to calculate the minimum number of subjects that were required for a study at only

10% of the desired sample size of 278 households. This is also because, given the nature, time and resources available for this investigation the sampled respondents were deemed sufficient to provide the required information to effectively realize the objectives of the study. A simple random sampling was employed to identify the subjects from each stratum to participate in the survey. Data was collected using closed ended and open ended questionnaires and structured Interviews. The reliability of the data collection tools were assessed through the split half method. Descriptive statistics such as mean, frequencies and percentages for each variable were calculated and tabulated using frequency distribution tables and charts. The analyzed data is presented in tables and charts for easy understanding.

Findings

Both quantitative and qualitative data was analyzed according to the study objectives and the population covered. Although the study targeted a sample of 278 households/ respondents of Bungoma County, only 115 respondents filled the questionnaires and returned them on time for analysis.

Background Information of the Respondents

Education Level of the Respondents. The study revealed that most of the respondents (65.2%) had at least attained a post primary level of education and only one third (34.8%) of them were illiterate as indicated in table 1 below, thus, the sample chosen comprised of literate residents who knew all about customer relations activities at the said Bungoma County Referral Hospital and therefore presented well informed choices.

Table 1: Education Level of the Respondents

Level	Frequency	Percent
Post primary level of Education	75	65.2
Below primary level of education	40	34.8
Total	115	100.0

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Referral Hospital

This objective was measured by looking at whether the following Customer Relations Activities were available at the Hospital: Employee relations, Sponsorships or partnerships, Speaking engagements, Community relations, organizing of Business events, the use of advertorials, the use brochures and catalogues, the use of Media relations, the use of Newsletters and other forms of printed media and the use of social media such as Facebook and WhatsApp.

Knowledge on Customer Relation Activities

The study revealed that majority (86%) of the residents included in the survey had knowledge on what exactly was meant by the notion Customer Relation and most of them conceptualized it as a process of the hospital relating well with her deemed customers in terms of the services offered at the hospital by creating a good rapport with the customers. This is clearly illustrated in chart 1 below:

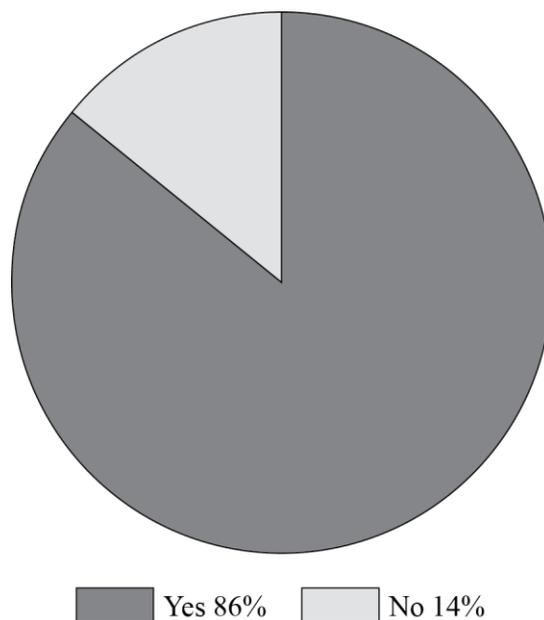


Chart 1: Knowledge on Customer Relation Activities

From the above chart 1, it is clear that only a few of the respondents (14%) sampled did not know exactly what was meant by the term customer relation and this was

attributed to the fact that either they were illiterate or they thought the question targeted them personally and therefore they didn't want to divert information regarding the subject. However, the 85% conceptualized the term customer relation correctly.

These findings concur with Grunig and Hunt (1984) that explains Customer Relation as the practice of managing the spread of information between an individual or organization and the deemed customers or consumers of the services. Seitel & Fraser (2007), says that the aim of Customer Relations by a company often is to persuade the public, investors, partners, employees, and other stakeholders to maintain a certain point of view about it, its leadership, products, or of political decisions.

Visitation to Bungoma County Referral Hospital

Frequency of Visitation to Bungoma County Referral Hospital. In order to identify the frequency of the 93% of the respondents included in the sample who admitted to have visited Bungoma County Referral Hospital, a question was posed in which the respondents were to categorically choose between the responses provided (very often, often, sometimes and rarely). This is clearly illustrated in chart 2 below:

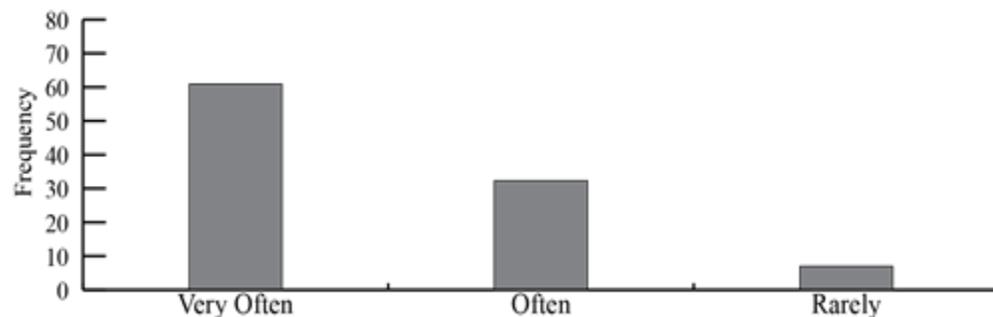


Chart 2: Frequency of Respondent Visitation to Bungoma Referral Hospital

From the above chart 2, it is quite clear that of the 93% of the respondents said that they had visited BDH, most (60.9%) had a frequency of Very often, 32.2% often and only a few (7%) had on rare occasion visited the Hospital. This clearly indicates that the sample picked for the study were well conversant with the situation on the ground and therefore provided information they well knew about the hospital as they had visited the Hospital more often.

Existing Forms of Customer Relations Activities. To identify the existing forms of Customer Relations Activities in Bungoma County Referral Hospital and because of the importance of the forms listed, a likert scale was used for answering where 1 represented Strongly Agree, 2 represented Agree, 3 Represented Neutral, 4 represented Disagree and 5 represented Strongly Disagree. Hence, the mean and standard deviation were used in measuring this variable. The variables measured here included the use of media, the use of social media, use of newsletters, use of brochures and other handouts, organizing of business events, Management of the hospital speaking in events, community relations and employee relations. This is

clearly illustrated in table 2 below:

Table 2: Existing Forms of Customer Relations Activities at Bungoma County Referral Hospital

Forms of CR Activities	Mean	Std. Deviation	Rank
Employee relations	2.58	1.451	1
Community Relations	2.67	1.400	2
The use of Media Relations	2.72	1.411	3
Organizing of business events	3.10	1.561	4
Management speaking in Events	3.16	1.448	5
The use of Social Media	3.43	1.650	6
The use of Newsletters	3.51	1.495	7
The use of brochures and other handouts	3.68	1.322	8

From the table 2 above, out of the 80% of the respondents who claimed that there were cases of Customer relations activities, “cases of employee relations” was ranked first (2.58), “Community relations” was ranked second (2.67), “the use of media relations” was ranked third (2.72), “Organizing of business events ” was ranked fourth (3.10), Management speaking in events was ranked fifth (3.16), “the use of social media” was ranked sixth (3.43), “the use of newsletters” was ranked seventh (3.51) and “the use of brochures” was ranked eighth (3.68). Thus among the existing forms of customer relations activities, employee relations, community relations and the use of media relations were found to be available at the hospital with the mean of 2.0 truncated.

The above findings are in line with the State of Queensland report, (2014) and state that the most common forms of Customer Relations Activities are among the listed above.

Overall Performance of Bungoma County Referral Hospital

It was established that the overall performance of the hospital was rated as somewhat desirable. Further probing revealed that most of the respondents lamented that in most cases they were just examined and referred to nearby private clinics/pharmacies for medication as the hospital did not have the necessary medications or equipment. An in-depth analysis via the use of ANOVA test on Customer Relations Activities was done to assess whether it had any significant relationship with the hospital overall performance. The F-value ($F=1.653$) was found to be significant at 5% level of significance. The result of the ANOVA test is summarized in table 3.

Table 3: ANOVA test for Customer Relations Activities on the Overall

	Sum Of	Df	Mean Square	F Square	Sig
Between Groups	.407	5	.136	1.653	.251
Within Groups	10.272	105	.098		
Total	10.679	108			

Source: Field data 2014

Optional Approaches that can be used to Enhance Customer Relations

Activities at Bungoma County Referral Hospital

The study found out that the following were some of the optional approaches as cited by the respondents;

- Most respondents felt that the government should employ new and fresh hospital staff and transfer all that were serving at the hospital as they lacked respect to the patient and in most cases, they abused the patients and did not give any credible guidance and assistance when required but rather left the clients to fend for themselves.
- The respondents also felt that there was need to fully incorporate the community members in running of the hospital so as to foster the smooth integration of the local capacities and skills as far as Customer Relations Activities was concerned.

Conclusions

The study worked with 115 household respondents of Bungoma County of which 55.3% of them were male. Of those individual sampled, 65.2% of them had at least attained a post primary level of education and only 34.8% had attained a pre-primary education and 54.8% of the respondents sampled were residents of the rural part of Bungoma Township. The study also found out that 86% of the resident sampled knew exactly what was meant by the notion, Customer Relations as most of them conceptualized it as a process of the hospital relating well with her deemed customers in terms of the services/ products offered. It was also evident that 93% of the respondents sampled had ever visited the hospital very often (60.9%) with 80% of the residents sampled accepting that there were forms of Customer Relations at Bungoma County Referral Hospital. The existing forms of Customer Relations Activities were: first, the employee relations, secondly, community relations and third was the use of media relations which were found to be available at the hospital with the mean of 2.0. Among the other forms of Customer Relations Activities, the hospital management organizing of business events and the use of newsletters and news prints had never been used in the hospital as they both had a mean of 1.0 truncated.

Recommendations

This paper therefore recommends that:

- The government should have Customer Relations officers posted in the hospital to effectively implement the Customer Relations Activities.
- The hospital management should contract ideal Customer Relations consultancies so as to clearly assist in the overall performance of the hospital.
- The hospital management should organize for short courses, workshops and seminars on Customer Relations Activities, for its staff to for effective implementation and performance.

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