

A Qualitative Study on Customer Management and Response of Apparel Shop Masters

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Abstract

The purpose of this study was to categorize customers types in accordance with current shop masters' perception of difficult customers and to identify their responding techniques and know-hows in dealing with those customers in detail, a qualitative study is carried out by conducting thorough interviews with the shop masters. The interview contained questions on occupational hold-ups of shop masters, types of hard-to-handle customers, techniques in handling difficult customers, their know-hows in customer managements and what they perceived as the qualities of a shop master. The results were as follows: 1) Customers who are perceived as difficult by shop masters are categorized into six types, making unreasonable demands, pointing out product defects, disregarding salespersons, making no purchase after testing products, having no personality and having no response. 2) Responding techniques for difficult customers were categorized into three types, 'active response', 'standby' and 'polite refusal'. 3) The result from the question on know-hows of shop masters in customer management can be divided into 4 groups, providing special treatment or information, building one-to-one relationship with the customer, suggesting garments in accordance with the customer's taste and providing friendly customer service. 4) For the question on perceived qualities as a shop master, individual quality, customer management capacity, work experience and occupational knowledge were answered.

Key Words : shop masters, Customer management, Responding techniques, Qualitative study

I . Introduction

The business strategy has been shifted from project-oriented to sales-oriented as the marketing focus in recent years has been shifted from product to customer value. In other words, the importance of salesperson has been highlighted as they could improve customer satisfaction and sales

through building and maintaining sound relationships with their customers and numerous researches on their customer response communication are in progress. Researches¹⁾²⁾ are to categorize customers into groups and find appropriate measures to satisfy customers in each group. Industries suggest sales methods and know-hows of shop masters by classifying customers based on the shop masters'

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hands-on experiences and researchers in academic fields categorize customers based on their shopping styles and psychological states to identify customer responding methods that are feasible at stores. Those researches³⁾⁴⁾⁵⁾ are getting more segmented and specialized and approached from various angles and perspectives based on retail and apparel types.

However, the key to building successful customer relationship in actual stores is in how to persuade difficult customers to buy products. If researches on understanding of those customer types and responding methods are more systematically carried out, better responding strategies are expected to be found.

Therefore, this study will include identification of difficult customers and detailed analysis of customer responding methods to turn hard-to-handle customers to loyal customers and discover customer management know-hows by conducting in-depth interviews with apparel shop masters who have years of experiences in their fields. The results from this study will be helpful to business in the context of customer relationship management and customer response communication strategies and also be useful as basic data for developing measurement methods for related researches.

II. Review of literature

Studies⁶⁾⁷⁾⁸⁾⁹⁾ on types of customer service of salesperson have been carried out by identifying characteristics of the salesperson that contribute to customer satisfaction and sales while building and maintaining appropriate relationships with customers. According to related researches on classification of customers for customer service and a report¹⁾ from the Korea Institute of

Vocational Development on sales intuition of shop managers in working environments, there are 8 types(extroverted, introverted, sensible, intuitive, speculative, emotional, judgemental, cognitive) of customer characteristics. Behaviors and purchasing styles of each characteristic type are stated and their preferred types of salesperson are mentioned in those reports. Characteristics of customers are classified into 7 groups and responding techniques for each group are suggested in a report on sales know-hows of apparel stores²⁾.

Weitz¹⁰⁾ defined a sales activity that changes based on information provided by salesperson and classified according to purchasing circumstances and types of customers as an adaptive selling. He also argued that effectiveness in sales can be increased through implementing such activity. Ahn¹¹⁾ argued in her qualitative study on relationships between customers and apparel shop managers that salespersons' nature, communication characteristics, investment in relationship and similarities are some of the factors that are influential to overall customer-manager relationships. Im & Kim¹²⁾ categorized salespersons into groups, dissatisfied salesperson, salesperson who is reluctant to work beyond designated duties, satisfied salesperson and result-oriented salesperson and stated behavioral changes toward favorable and unfavorable customers for each type of salespersons by analysing types of apparel salespersons in Daegu area. Lee & Kim¹³⁾ stated in their research that convenient facilities and kindness of salesperson, knowledge, politeness, appearance and image, attentiveness are considered as important customer service by female customers in their 20s. They also argued that customer service expectations are different depending on the type of clothes they buy. As a result, it is

apparent that salespersons attitude towards customer management and sales methods play pivotal roles in increasing customer loyalty and satisfaction. It is important to conduct qualitative studies on customer management techniques and responding know-hows of shop masters with many years of experiences in apparel industry and the result from the studies can be used as a guideline for dealing with difficult customers.

III. Research contents

In order to categorize customers types in accordance with current shop masters' perception of difficult customers and to identify their responding techniques and know-hows in dealing with those customers in detail, a qualitative study is carried out by conducting thorough interviews with the shop masters who are currently working at department stores or apparel shops.

Contents and range of the study are as follows,

First, identify hard-to-handle customers in accordance with the shop masters' perception.

Second, find out about the shop masters' responding methods to those customers.

Third, discover the shop masters' customer management techniques.

Fourth, ask what they think of the required qualities to be a shop master.

Fifth, find out if there are disparities in customer management and responding techniques depending on the interviewed shop masters' working experiences.

IV. Research method

In order to identify types of difficulties, responding techniques and customer managements

when shop managers and salespersons deal with customers, individual in-depth interviews were carried out to 32 shop masters who are currently working at H department stores or Fashion specialty shop in Seoul with 8 to 20 years of experience in sales. Interviews was conducted for two months (July 2006 to August 2006)

Each interview was carried out for 1~2 hours after their working hours. Respondents freely answered the questions and their responses were recorded. The interview contained questions on occupational hold-ups of shop masters, types of hard-to-handle customers, techniques in handling difficult customers, their know-hows in customer managements and what they perceived as the qualities of a shop master. The words and cases in contents of interview were coded and counted to extract types of customer managements and reponses from the interview. The responses were gathered and later classified and analyzed in accordance with types.

V. Results and Discussion

1. Analysis on the types of difficult customers

Customers who are perceived as difficult by shop masters are categorized into six types, making unreasonable demands, pointing out product defects, disregarding salespersons, making no purchase after testing products, having no personality and having no response. Customers who are making unreasonable demands can be divided into 4 categories, asking for unreasonable discounts, demanding for freebies, insisting on full refund or exchange for broken products and demanding for unreasonable repair. Majority of salespersons chose this type as the most difficult customer to deal with. Mute and indecisive customers are considered to be the type that have

no response. Customers who point out product defects and criticize products by comparing it with products from other companies are classified as the pointing out type. Many salespersons considered customers who do not make any purchase after trying on so many clothes as difficult. They put customers who have no manners and look down on salespersons into the disregarding type. They also find customers with no taste in brands and styles difficult to serve. <Table 1>

2. Responding techniques for difficult customers

The majority of respondents fall within the category of 'active response' that they actively respond to unreasonable demands through making positive remarks, giving sufficient explanation or engaging in conversation.<Table 2> 'Standby' is the second highest response from the interviewees that they pay attention to and wait for

customers' response. Responding passively with a mere smile, waiting and observing customers' reaction and taking a step further to lead a conversation and identify the customer's needs fall into this category. The last category is 'polite refusal' that the salespersons ask for the customer's consent or make an alternative suggestion but at the end, they just refuse or politely decline the customer's unfair demand. Some but very small percentage of respondents said that they just ignore those unreasonable requests.

3. Know-hows of shop masters in customer management

The result from the question on know-hows of shop masters in customer management can be divided into 4 groups, providing special treatment or information, building one-to-one relationship with the customer, suggesting garments in accordance

<Table 1> Customers who are perceived as difficult by shop masters

Type	Sub type	Interview results	Number of response
Making unreasonable demands or Disregarding Salespersons	Making Unreasonable Type	Asking for unreasonable discount	20
		Demanding for freebies	
		Insisting on full refund or exchange for broken products	
		demanding for unreasonable repair	
	Pointing out product defect type	Pointing out product defect	11
		Comparing and Criticizing products	
disregarding type	Impolitely disregarding salesperson	9	
	Neglecting products		
Making No purchase	Making no purchase after trying on so many clothes	11	
having no personality or having no response	having no personality type	Different style from the store theme or style	10
		No personality or taste	
having no response	having no response	Mute customers	15
		Indecisive customers	

*The number of the response can be different from the total number of responses as interviewees answered questions without any restriction.

<Table 2> Responding techniques for difficult customers

Type	Sub type	Interview results	Number of response
Standby type	Respond with a smile	Respond with a smile	11
	Pay attention to a response	Read a customer's mind and wait	12
		Constantly pay attention to a customer	
	Induce a conversation	Identify the customer needs through conversation	6
Active response type	Unconditionally accept the customer's demand	Providing services demanded by the customer	13
		Suggest various designs and styles	
		Listen to the customer's demand	
	Respond	Praise	7
Response/Praise			
Polite refusal type	Friendly explanation	Thorough explanation	15
		Explanation about the demand	
		Friendly conversation	
		Assurance	
	Persuasion	Asking for consent through persuasion	7
		Refusal through giving alternative options	
	Disregard	Friendly but providing no service	8
Disregard demands with a smile			

with the customer's taste and providing friendly customer service. <Table 3> Providing special service includes giving presents, discount and allowing credit card payments and giving special information includes informing sales dates and new product news and sending congratulatory messages for special days. For building one-to-one relationship with their customers, salespersons memorize names and clothing tastes of their customers and maintain closeness with them in accordance with their customer list.

4. Requirements for a salesperson perceived by shop masters

For the question on occupational difficulties <Table 4> , the majority of respondents answered

that they have most difficulties in having relationships with their customers which includes providing customer service and responding to extreme customers followed by handling official works such as management of staffs and inventories and emotional burdens of producing outcomes. They also expressed their personal difficulties such as physical fatigue from overwork and lack of personal time and capacity. For the question on perceived qualities as a shop master, individual qualities such as fashion sense, appearance, personal management, occupational confidence and devotion and leadership are the most chosen answer followed by customer management abilities such as recognizing customers' tastes and suggesting styles, serving

customers with kindness, closeness and a smile and understanding their customers. They also acknowledged experience in related job fields,

occupational capacity, knowledge, personal development and business knowledge as qualities needed for a shop master.

<Table 3> Know-hows of shop masters in customer management

Type	sub-type	Interview results	Number of response
Finest service	Provide privileges or information	Informing sales dates/ special offers	20
		Sending congratulatory messages for anniversaries	
		Providing information on upcoming products	
		Giving presents/freebies or membership card discount	
Friendly service	Friendly service	Providing the most comfortable and friendly service	12
		Providing the friendliest service with a smile	
Communication with customers	Suggesting clothing in accordance with customer taste	Identify customer's taste/style	17
		Suggesting clothing in accordance with customer's taste	
	Forming one-to-one relationship with the customer	Memorizing customer's face	12
		Memorizing customer's taste	
		Organizing customer lists	9
		Maintaining friendly relationship with customer	
Maintaining credible relationship with customer			

<Table 4> Requirements for a salesperson perceived by shop masters

Type	sub-type	Interview results	Number of response
Individual quality	Positive attitude	Confidence/self-conceit/leadership	13
		Positive attitude, sincerity	
	Professionalism	Devotion/sincerity/honesty	16
		Responsibility/patience/faithfulness	
	Appearance and personal management	Appearance(speech/posture)	12
		sociability	
Fashion sense	Sense	10	
	Clothing matching sense		
Customer management capacity	Responding ability	Clothing matching capacity in accordance to customer's taste/style	20
		Friendliness/ pleasant facial expression/ Smile	
		Customer management capacity	
		Understanding customers	
Work experience and occupational knowledge	Work experience and occupational knowledge	Great knowledge in the related fields	26
		Knowledge about clothing	
		Quickness, Ability to understand customer	
		Inventory management/ computing skills/ staff management	

5. Analysis on disparities according to work experience

From the analysis on disparities according to work experience, there is no difference in answers to questions based on types of customer, responding methods and customer management but there are some differences in responding percentage to each question. In other words, shop masters with many years of experience regarded customers with no response as the most difficult customer while shop masters with short career recognized making unreasonable demands as a characteristic of a difficult customer.

A large number of shop masters with long working history chose active response with polite explanation as the answer to dealing with hard-to-handle customers and also selected maintaining one-to-one relationship and providing service and information as their know-how in customer management while many shop masters with short career chose polite refusal for responding to difficult customers and said suggesting garments in accordance with customers' taste and providing friendly customer service as their know-hows in customer management.

VI. Conclusions

Since difficult customer types perceived by shop masters are vary and a large portion of shop masters recognizes relationship with customers as occupational difficulties, it is clear that shop masters who have direct contact with customers play very important roles in attracting customers and forming long term relationships with customers. In order to make successful sales, shop masters actively respond to unfair demands made by their customers and show positive attitudes in dealing with difficult customers through

paying attention to disinterested customers and enthusiastically engaging in conversation to gain an understanding of customer needs. They also provide custom-made service and information to each customer as they consider one-to-one relationship with their customers very important. They accumulate customer management know-hows through offering suitable styles and friendly customer service to fit customer's taste and needs. For the qualities required to be a successful shop master, they believe that individual qualities such as personal management, occupational confidence, devotion and leadership are more important than mere knowledge for the job.

The result of this study can not be generalized as the respondents of the interview are limited to shop masters who are currently working at female clothing stores. However, it will serve as basic data for developing measurement methods for customer relationship management and customer response communication strategies.

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