INTRODUCTION

Carlzon defines front-line employees are viewed as the 'key' to customer perceptions of service quality (in Georgantzias and Madu, 1994). Consequently, customers' perceptions of service quality are often based on the manner in which the service is well delivered by front-line people. In the term of stage perspective, front-stage perspectives are more visible or apparent to customers (Mangold and Babakus, 1991). Front-line people cannot hide problems in the organization.
When they perform services badly, there is a warning signal that there must be a problem. Moreover, front-line people have to face the reality that service quality depends on the differences among customers' expectation and perception of quality, therefore service companies are compelled to pay attention to front-line people in order to be able to anticipate diverse and complex customers' request.

Front-line people can be the crucial key to see the atmosphere of a service company. Kelley has shown that front-line people treat customers similarly to the way in which they, as employees, are well treated by management (in Berkley and Gupta, 1995). If front-line people are cold, if they are simply unhappy or inconvenient and grumbling, they are not likely to serve the best for customers. Front-line people are supposed to show their best performance for customers if there is a climate for employee well being (Schneider and Bowen, 1993). They argue that a climate for employee well being especially front-line people serve as a foundation for a climate for service. Front-line people require feeling their own demands have been met by the organization before they can fulfill the demands of customers. The climate for employee well-being is a very critical point in a service business. Schneider also declares that the climate for service created in an organization including how service is delivered is critical for service unit effectiveness. He also adds that a) customers can sense the climate for service in a different establishment; b) when customers feel the service climate is warm and friendly, their perceptions of service quality are more positive and loyal to the service unit is enhanced.
If a service company has set a climate for employee well being in their mind, they can achieve a lot of benefits. Some of them are a) front-line people can be used as a facilitator to face the highly competitive condition in a service field; b) front-liners can be a good medium to endure the high profitability of service companies in a longer term.

In the term of the front-line classification, this discussion is about to focus on customer services. Their profession can be in a bank, a hotel, hospital, education field and insurance company. There are some considerable factors to choose customer service in the discussion such as a) customer services are more in touch with their customers. Their position becomes more personal than other position like tellers in a bank; b) customer service are more attractive because the activities do not emphasize speed, efficiency and productivity; c) customer service representatives have a broader responsibility, they are problem solvers for individual customers; d) they have a greater personal contact with their customers. Reynierse and Harker (1992) argue that they become both an increasingly importance interface with their customers and a first-line defense for identifying emerging customer service problems.

The purposes of this article are 1) to highlight the importance of customer service as front-liners that become a competitive weapon to survive in a longer period. This discussion is also based on the servuction model. 2) to present some factors that support customer services' performance to be the best performers. Some factors involve human resource management system, empowerment, and the new treatments for employees.
DISCUSSION

A. Front-line as A Competitive Weapon

During the 20th century, many companies have shifted from manufacturing to services. Economic growth has in its turn fueled the growth of the service sector such as companies, institution and individuals (Bateson, 1995). New technology has led to tremendous changes in the nature of many services and in the development of new services. Our life depends more on service. This new fact, together with the growth of service sectors, urges service companies to find out distinctive features that might be differentiated from other service companies. The distinctive priorities can become their priorities to anticipate the competition.

Over the years, the top priorities have included conformance quality, product reliability, on time delivery, low price, fast delivery and performance quality (Chase and Aquilano and Jacobs, 1998). Besides, there are other priorities that become a weapon for service companies such as people friendliness, responsiveness and attention to customers' needs. Front-line sector can be one of the priorities of service companies.

Front-line people as the representatives of service companies are the window to see the whole company. If front-line people, here customer services, are able to provide the best services and to show their best performance or in other words if they can exceed customers' expectation, customers will be satisfied. Their satisfaction
experience will be conveyed to other customers through word of mouth communication.

Customer service staff's function is increasingly important. They can be good sources to give inputs for the improvements of a company performance. They have a daily contact with customers therefore they are the best sources of information (Berkley and Gupta, 1995). Every moment between customer service people and customers is an opportunity to learn more about customers' want and expectation. Customer service employees listen suggestions continually from customers. They hear customers' complaints.

There are characteristics that are easily recognized by customers and have to be possessed by customer service people. These characteristics can become a good medium to attract customers to enjoy services of the company. Customers can recognize customer service people performance by identifying their attitude. Reynierse and Hacker (1992) have demonstrated the characteristics of employee attitude. *First characteristics* is pride in service. It includes give friendly and courteous service, give prompt and efficient service, explain company policies and procedures, and give accurate service to accounts. *Second* is customer orientation. It includes customer really counts; complaints receive prompt attention and a trial to take customers' point of view. Leeds (1992) also defines some characteristics of customer service people or other personnel of front-liners such as courtesy, service quality and telephone behavior. *Courtesy* concerns how customer service to greet the customers, stand to greet the customer, shake hands, establish eye contact and offer a
seat. *Service quality* considers how to receive customers well, establish rapport with customers, identify customers' needs, limit interruption and know the product. Finally, *telephone behavior* considers how customer service people to use a pleasant tone of voice, listen without interrupting, speak clearly, show interest, identify customers' needs and know the products.

### B. Servuction Model

Bateson (1995) argues that servuction model shows the interactive process or experience. The visible components of the organization are supported by the invisible components that provide the administration and maintenance of the physical facilities; further, as service is usually is delivered to groups of customers simultaneously; benefits are derived from interaction with other elements. The whole of the model creates the experience and the experience in turn creates the benefit to customers.

![Figure 1. The Servuction Service Model](image-url)
In service encounters, there are some elements in the servuction service model. There is the internal organization system, which is invisible to customers and physical environment, and contact personnel, which are visible to customers. Suppose, a customer coming to an insurance company to register insurance. The customer sees other applicants waiting for this and other services. The customer can also see the physical environment, which consists of furniture, interior and facilities. The most prominent element is a contact personnel. Customers can recognize the front lines including customer service and teller. Their ability to deliver a service system is back up by the invisible elements in the organization. If the customer is satisfied, he will tell his experience to others.

Discussion about contact personnel, one of the elements in the servuction model, in this article becomes crucial. Customer service people also develop service encounter. Surprenant and Solomon (in Bitner and Booms and Tetreault, 1990) define the service encounter as the dyadic interaction between customers and service providers. In order to perform well for customers, customer service employees have an expected role. The expectation can be good attitudes. They have to possess some characteristics as mentioned in the previous page such as courtesy, service quality, and pride in service and customer orientation. If customer service people can exceed the expectation of customers, they will be satisfied and will tell others about their experience.
C. Factors Supporting The Customer Service Employees' Performance

1. Human Resource Management System

Bateson (1995) argues that human resource management system can be shown to have a direct relationship with the outcomes experienced by customers and to have an indirect relationship on the climate created within the organization. Schneider and Bowen (1993) argue that the internal organization climate is visible to front-line employees "spill over" on external customers' a consequence of the psychological and physical closeness that exists between front-line employees and customer service in service encounters. Services are frequently done in face-to-face and consumed simultaneously.

In other words, if customers' experience say that customer service people can deliver the service with a strong motivation, the good climate of the organization will visible to customers. Bateson adds that human resource management creates a passion for a service within the organization. When this passion is strong, employees speak favorably about performance feedback, internal equity of compensation, training and staff quality. Human resource management practices are the key levers available to senior management for creating a type of organization that can be a source of sustainable competitive advantage. To do this, the service organizations have to invest in people, to make recruitment and training and to link compensation to performance for every employee especially front-line people.

Schneider and Bowen (1993) provide four key ground rules that guide service companies to manage their human resource management.
1) Manage Human Resource Strategically

There are two perspectives of human resource management function. One sees human resource management as simply providing a basis on which to compete. Human resource function just does routine activities such as recruiting people for filling the vacant position. The other perspective sees human resource management as a source of competitive advantage.

With the new function, human resource management has to be given a greater attention to manage human resource activities such as training, career development opportunities, job security, performance appraisal, performance feedback and compensation in order to support the service company performance. In the condition with a high competition among service companies, it would be better if human resource management is viewed as a source of competitive advantage. If related to the existence of customer services as the front-line people, they have to be carefully managed. There are some activities of human resources that manages customer service people as follows:

a. Selective hiring

In order to show the best performance, service companies have to expend the effort needed to ensure that they recruit the right people at the first time. Pfeffer and Veiga (1999) propose some requirements for selective hiring. First, service companies need to have a large applicant pool from which to select. Second, the organizations need to be clear about what are the most critical skills and attributes needed in its applicant pool. For instance, applicants for customer service positions
are evaluated on the basis of responsiveness, flexibility, and courtesy to fulfill or to serve customers' demand. Third, the skills and abilities need to be carefully considered and consistent with the particular job requirements. Customer service employees are hired primarily for their skill and personality and for willingness to provide good services. However, knowledge is also important to support their performance. The requirement encompasses the combination knowledge, skill and attitude.

b. Extensive training

Knowledge and skill are critical. Service providers must possess the required skills and knowledge to perform services. Greater knowledge allows customer service people to help their customer and make them capable of important judgements on matters (Berkley and Gupta, 1995). Customer services employees can experience intense frustration when facing a customer and not having the answer.

Training is an essential component of high performance work systems because the system relies on front-line people skill and initiative to identify and resolve problems, to initiate changes in a work method and to take responsibility for quality (Pfeffer and Veiga, 1999). All requires a skill to perform the requisite task. The work condition of customer service demands them to behave with courtesy and warmth. They have to greet customers with a nice smiling. They have to eliminate a frowning look. Training has to encompass some activities that can make customer service employees behave with appropriate manners such as how to treat or to greet customers nicely. The training should also focus on communication channel,
interpersonal skill, technical competence, product knowledge, sales development and service skill.

c. Compensation

Compensation can include all financial payments to employees such as salaries and wages, benefits, bonuses, profit sharing and awards. The purpose of compensation is to increase employees' performance including customer service. Compensation has to encourage customer services to improve and to make themselves more valuables to themselves and the company performance (Straub and Attner, 1994). Customer service employees who consider their compensation fair and adequate feel that they are being treated with a recognition and time. Compensation should provide employee with a sense of belonging to the firm.

d. Reduction of status difference

To make all employees from higher to lower level feel importantly needed, the organization has a high commitment to eliminate the status difference that making a gap between the higher and the lower level. Pfeffer and Veiga (1999) suggest that this is accomplished in two principle ways-symbolically through the use of language and labels, physical space and dress and substantively, in the reduction of the organization's degree of wage inequality, particularly across level. Customer services are in lower level management. However, they have to make that they are very important and totally needed in performing services. The first contact between the service organization and customers is through customer service.
2) Manage Human Resource Contingently

The management of human resources must be designed to meet the organizations' need. For example, in a fast food restaurant where customers demand speed and efficiency, employees have to place emphasis on speed. Human resource management practices should be designed contingent upon this particular customer definition of good service. Selection, training and reward system should aim at producing employees who can work quickly. In customer service where customers demand a special treatment, customer service people have to place emphasis on customization. Human resource management emphasizes training that can produce customer service people who can adapt to diversity of customers' demand.

3) Manage Human Resources Scientifically

Service should be based on customers' expectation. Service companies can measure actual performance. The information can be taken by conducting a survey. Besides, front-line people are good at measuring and evaluating service quality. Customer service people are often the first to recognize when customers do not accept service. Customer service people must be trained before conducting a survey to find out what customers expect and do not expect. The information gathered must be communicated to the organization.
4) Manage Human Resource Cross-Functionally

Focusing only on employee well being climate is not sufficient. Human resources practices have to work together with non-human resources practices. There must be an integrated linkage that tie between human resource system and non-human resource system. Human resource system will work optimally if non-human resources support it. Non-human resources system includes facilities, information and technology, good system, logistics and operation practices. Customer service people will perform well if human resource and non-human resource system back them up.

2. Empowerment

Because customer service employees are both physically and psychologically close to their customers, they are a source of valuable information about customers' needs (Schneider and Bowen, 1984). Customer service employees are more aware of new services likely to meet customers' needs. More importantly, customer service people are able to be responsive to customers' needs at the first time. Therefore, the service company has to encourage and reward them to exercise initiative and creativity.

Bowen and Lawler III (1992) define empowerment as sharing with front-line employees four organizational ingredients: 1) information about the organization's performance; 2) rewards based on the organization's performance; 3) knowledge that enables employees to understand and contribute to organization's performance; 4) power to make decisions that influence organizational direction and performance.
Empowering customer service people as front-liners have same implications. The work condition of customer service demands the ability of employee to adapt quickly to diverse customers’ demands. Empowerment works at best in the business where people need the greater care of customer service. One of the main jobs of customer service people is to build a trust and a long-term relationship with customers. Empowerment creates a flexible situation for customer service people to establish the relationship between the organizations and their customers.

The difficulty of managing service tasks makes the empowerment become a valuable and effective way to apply. Employees are empowered then they have greater a chance to do discretion during service delivery. However, once more, the implementation of empowerment does not liberate front-line employees to do tasks, which are out of control from the goals and service objectives. The front-line people are provided with the organization programs, so they have a guideline, which tasks have to do and not to do. Customer service people can be given a creative discretion. Kelly (1993) defines creative discretion as a condition when the potential means for performing service tasks are available to service personnel and they develop the means for accomplishing a task they are exercising. For example, customer service people have been given certain tasks to do, but they are free to develop their own creativity to serve the customers. Exactly, most customers prefer a special treatment from customer service people.
3. Creating new treatment for customer service employee's performance

Service companies that recognize the importance of delivering superior usually are open to change and are willing to contribute time, money and effort to meet customers' expectation. The organization has to invite the top management to be actively involved. Top management has to establish a corporate vision that commits to excellent service. The top management should share all relevant organizational information to all level management including low level such as front-line people. The frequent, honest and open communication with employees including front-line people is demanded to create service excellence.

The organization has to seek feedback. The feedback does not come only from customers but front-line people can provide a source of valuable feedback. They always have a contact personnel that knows the needs of customers. They can ask directly such as "have we served better, what else can we do for you, how can we improve". A simple method to detect customers' expectation is to ask selected customers to appraise actual service delivery. The measurement of customer service includes comment, suggestion box, telephone research, questionnaire and interview.

Customer service people can also be motivated to commit to total customer satisfaction. The organization implements recognition and incentive programs to reward outstanding customer satisfaction initiative and projects. Publicize such recognition and reward in various communication media such as newsletters, bulletin board, department meeting and company periodicals. Last, but not least, the company has to enhance the performance of all level management, especially
customer service people as front-liners by doing a continuous improvement. Quality becomes a part of business activities.

**CONCLUSION**

The high interaction between customer service people and customers has put the service organization to focus more on the role of customer service people as front-liners. Front-line people are seen as the 'key' to customer perceptions of service quality therefore customers' perceptions of service quality are often based on the manner in which the service is well delivered by front-line people.

Front-line people are able to show their performance for customers if there is a climate for employee well being. The climate for employee well being especially front-line people serves as a foundation for a climate for service. Front-line people require feeling their own demands have been met by the organization before they can fulfill the demands of customers. The climate for employee well being is a very critical point in a service business. Customers can sense the climate for service in a different establishment and when customers feel the service climate is warm and friendly, their perceptions of service quality are more positive and loyalty to the service unit is enhanced.

The benefits of a climate for employee well being are a) front-line people can be used as a facilitator to face the highly competitive condition in a service field; b) front-lines can be a good medium to endure the high profitability of service companies in a longer term.
In the term of front-line classification, the article focuses on customer services, which are more in touch with their customers. Customer service representatives have a broader responsibility, they are problem solvers for individual customer and they have a greater personal contact with their customers. Customer service people also have to face the reality that service quality depends on the differences among customers' expectation and perception of quality therefore, service companies are compelled to pay attention to front-line employees in order to be able to anticipate diverse and complex customers' request. The human resource management system, empowerment and new treatments for customer service people performance.
REFERENCES


Schneider and____________.1984. New services design, development and implementation and the employee. Chicago: the American Marketing Association.
