

THE CUSTOMER AS A CO-PRODUCER OF PROFESSIONAL SERVICES

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Abstract

Presents the theoretical context of service production which permits/necessitates the customer co-production function. Outlines the forms which this production function may take. Considers the variation in the degree of customer participation in service production. Assesses the relevance of various co-production roles found in consumer services to professional services. Examine ways in which professional service providers can achieve suitable levels of customer involvement so as to optimise service quality.

Introduction

There has been much debate over the forms and desirability of customer participation in service production. Much of the literature on customer involvement originates primarily from consumer services. The concepts presented in such literature are explored in this paper to seek useful ways in which they can be applied to professional service environments.

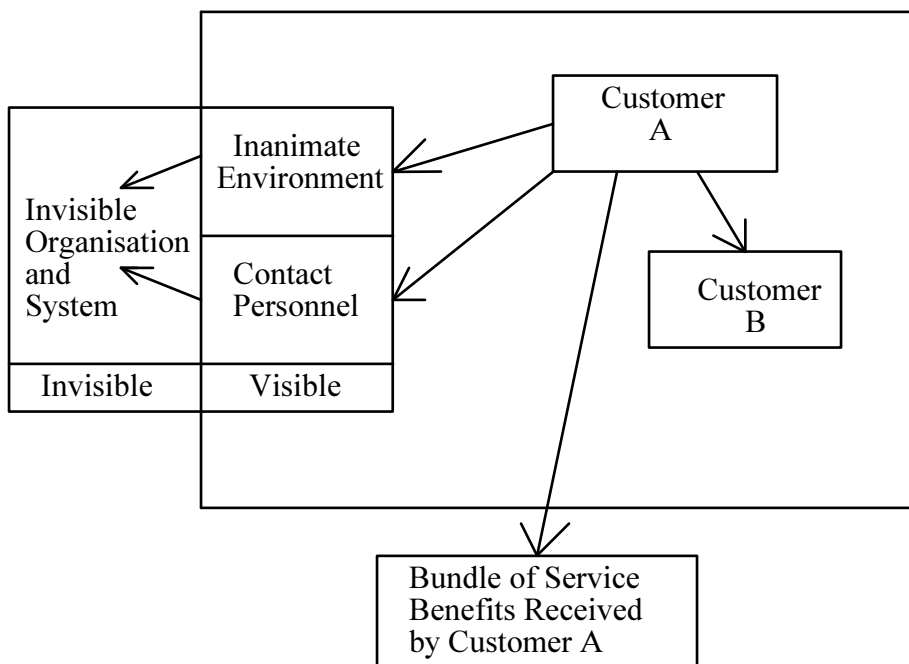
The customer should be seen as a participant in the service delivery process. In the words of Bowen (1986) the customer is a human resource. Mills, Chase and Margulies (1983) claim that customers are members of service organisations and play a crucial role in organisational performance. Accordingly, they propose that customers be viewed as "partial employees" whose behaviour needs to be managed to facilitate productivity.

Customer participation in service: models

Some models of the service production/delivery process allow for customer participation. Indeed, Meyer and Westerbarkey (1994) go so far as to state that a characteristic of any service is "the *integration of external factors into the production process*. Service is only possible when the external factors (customers or customer objects) are integrated into the production process. The production and sale of service can only begin when, for example, passengers enter a bus or a customer brings a car to the repair shop."

The servuction system model, originally developed by Eiglier and Langeard (1976), was the one of the earliest contributions to service management research to involve the notion of customers interacting both with one another and the service organisation. Essentially, the servuction system model divides the service organisation into two component parts. The relevant distinction is between parts which are visible to the customer and parts which are invisible to the customer. The visible part is sub-divided into the inanimate environment, and the service providers or service contact personnel. Sometimes known as front-line employees, these are the individuals who interact with the customer during the service experience. The model also contains Customers A and B, reflecting the important influence which other customers may have on a customer's perception of his service experience.

Figure 1 **The Servuction System**



source: Langeard, E., Bateson, J., Lovelock, C. and Eiglier, P., *Marketing of Services: New Insights from Consumers and Managers*. Cambridge, M.A: Marketing Science Institute, Report No. 81-104, 1981.

As it became increasingly realised that in service organisations marketing and production are frequently simultaneous activities, service researchers focused on understanding the interaction between customer contact employees and customers. This produced an expansive literature on how to manage the service encounter,

including some research on how to manage the participation of the customer. Parts of the literature on managing customer participation had an emphasis on how customers might contribute to productivity, whilst other parts focused more on how customers might contribute to quality. This paper is concerned primarily with how the customer as a co-producer may contribute to service quality. It is, however, worth briefly reviewing how views have emerged on the desirability of customer participation in service production.

The desirability of customer participation in service production

The literature on service management seems to increasingly accept the inevitability of customers usually being present as the service is offered. There has been much attention paid to issues related to the service encounter (for example: Czepiel, Solomon, and Surprenant, 1985). Some of the earlier service literature, however, discussed the presence and participation of the customer with negative connotations, and sometimes suggested that service management should try and minimise customer participation and presence. Bauer (1968) discusses the problems associated with the unpredictability or irregularity of service customer behaviour, especially within competitive service markets.

Chase (1978) advocated that, where possible, service activities should be carried out in a (remote) back office so as to maximise efficiency. This reflected the general desire for production within a closed system rather than an open system. (i.e. using the back-office as a buffer). Operating efficiency was seen as diminishing the more the customer, and the associated uncertainty, enters into the production system. Chase (1981) expressed this using the following equation:

$$\text{Potential operating efficiency} = f \left(\frac{1 - \text{Customer contact time}}{\text{Service creation time}} \right)$$

Interestingly, Chase later revised his views to emphasise some of the positive sides of increasing customer:employee contact (Chase and Hayes, 1991). In a similar vein to Chase, Danet (1981, p. 384) argues that "clients do, of course, pose problems for organizations - by disrupting their routines, ignoring their offers of service, failing to comply with their procedures, making exaggerated demands and so on".

Such approaches as described above have increasingly given way to approaches which accept, even welcome, the customer's participation and attempt to use it to add value and/or reduce costs.

The extent of customer participation in service production

One of the reasons behind this change in approach to customer participation has been the increased understanding of service marketing, and the greater awareness of the close interplay between operations and marketing in service environments. Although the early literature may have questioned the desirability of customer participation, it is increasingly accepted that the level of participation depends on context. The following table provides some illustrations of how customer participation levels vary. The divisions shown are low, moderate and high customer participation, but customer participation can also be seen as a continuum.

Table 1 Levels of customer participation

Low: customer presence required during service delivery	Moderate: customer inputs required for service creation	High: customer co-creates the service product
Products are standardised	Client inputs customise a standard service	Active client participation guides the customised service
Service is provided regardless of any individual purchase	Provision of service requires customer purchase	Service cannot be created apart from the customer's purchase and active participation
Payment may be the only required customer input	Customer inputs (information/materials) necessary for adequate outcome, but service firm provides the service	Customer inputs are mandatory and co-create the outcome
<i>Examples:</i>		
<i>End consumer</i>		
Airline travel	Hair cut	Marriage counselling
Motel	Annual physical exam	Personal training
Fast-food restaurant	Full service restaurant	Weight-reduction programme
<i>Business-to-business customer</i>		
Uniform cleaning service	Agency-created advertising campaign	Management consulting
Pest control	Payroll service	Executive management seminar
Interior greenery maintenance service	Independent freight transportation	Install wide area network (WAN)

Source: Bitner *et al* (1997)

An example of a low level of customer participation is the cinema where the customer's physical presence is the main requirement. Bitner *et al* (1997) suggest that business-to-business services requiring little customer participation are not as frequent as consumer services requiring little customer participation. They provide illustration of how customer participation varies in business-to-business services:

- a) low participation: in the case of interior greenery maintenance service the client needs only ensure the service provider with physical access to the premise.
- b) moderate participation: in the case of outsourcing payroll the client is required to input information, some effort and possessions.
- c) high participation: in the case of training services the client will need to help define the nature of the training, identify the right employees for training, provide learning incentives and ensure post-training follow-up. Failure to do so will adversely affect the service outcome.

Customer production functions

The service customer can participate in a number of ways. The following is a review of forms which the customer production function may take. Increasingly the service customer is viewed as a resource to be utilised in the service firm's production process. This perspective is much stronger in service than in manufacturing, although the customer does have some production function in manufacturing environments and this function, assisted by advancement in communication possibilities, may well be expanding.

The customer as a productive resource can be usefully illustrated in terms of the Mills and Moberg *Systems Model of the Service Production Process* (Mills and Moberg, 1982). Customer involvement is seen as occurring within three subsystems: input, throughput and output. *Customer input involvement* refers to activity such as the customer outlining his problems, needs, and relevant industry-specific information. This often involves customer input before actually entering the service system. The service provider may encourage or require the customer to undertake such activity. For example: reading a case study before a class; bringing appropriate documents to a meeting with a tax accountant. *Customer throughput involvement* refers to both the provision of accurate information and choosing among alternatives. *Customer output involvement* refers to activities of customers after they have left the service system itself.

This model of the service production process (or transformation system) reveals the scope of customer involvement. The customer is best viewed as a "partial employee" and as Mills (1986, p.141) points out: "although the client may not be

involved in all three subsystems - input, throughput, and output - rarely can a client escape performing some activities in at least one of the subsystems". From the service provider's perspective failure to motivate adequate customer involvement increases the risk of customer dissatisfaction, and human nature means customers tend to blame others rather than themselves.

As a direct production resource, that is as a provider of labour, the customer can improve service quality. Bateson (1985) provides a number of reasons, beyond mere financial incentive, why customers may be motivated to engage in self-production. He suggests that some customers find the act of participating intrinsically attractive. Other motivations are connected to perceived quality improvements such as a greater sense of control over the timing and outcome of service. Bateson suggests that service providers should segment their customers from the perspective of propensity and capability to engage in higher levels of participation.

In order to obtain both productivity and quality advantages Schneider and Bowen (1995) advocate the application of market segmentation to the selection of customer resources. They raise the question "Can the organisation actually screen out/exclude customers who do not bring, at entry, the knowledge, skills, and abilities for coproduction, or does the organisation have to take all comers for economic or legal reasons?".

Customer failure can lead to service failure. Lengnick-Hall (1996, p. 799) illustrates this when she writes "If customers provide information that is incomplete or inaccurate, or if they make commitments of funds or time that they do not meet, their inputs make quality more difficult to achieve.". According to Bird (1993) some Madison Avenue advertising agencies report that "some accounts are so difficult to work with that they simply cannot - or will not - service them".

There is a need to teach and train the customer so that they will know what to expect and how to behave in various situations. Schaaf (1997, p. 23) puts this point very powerfully when he writes "By no stretch of the imagination is the customer always right; instead, an essential task of everyone from design and marketing, to the frontline, to upper management is to *teach* the customer how to be right". In the context of professional services, with their tendency to be more complex and less familiar, Bloom (1984) suggests that customers will desire to know more about their role in the service process and about the information and actions required for them to participate effectively in service creation.

Furthermore, it has been suggested (Bitner,1990) that participation in the production process may make service consumers more open to accepting at least

some of the blame themselves when service failure occurs. In a study of the contribution of customers to effective service interactions in banks, it was found that there was a positive correlation between customer perception of their own performance, both functional and technical, and satisfaction with their bank (Kelley, Skinner and Donnelly, 1992).

In addition to direct production participation it is possible to identify customer roles which can improve service quality and / or quality image of the service organisation. These roles can be described as:

- marketing role
- quality control and product development role
- green service quality collaborator role
- service leadership role
- customer:customer interaction role

marketing role

The evaluation process for services (c.f. goods) typically has more emphasis on experience qualities and credence qualities, than on search qualities. Thus in service purchase trust often has a prominent importance, and factors such as word-of-mouth endorsement from satisfied customers can be more powerful than actual paid advertising. Thus service customers engaging in positive word-of-mouth are fulfilling an important marketing role, both gaining new customers and improving the quality image of the service organisation. For example, research findings by a US house builder revealed that over 60 percent of sales originated from positive word-of-mouth (Reichheld and Sasser, 1990).

Customers who engage in word-of-mouth usually do not consciously see themselves as performing a marketing function. Some service organisations, however, actively recruit customers with marketing intent. For example: language courses abroad which offer a free place to teachers who manage to assemble a certain size of group.

The timing of customer participation in the service can also have marketing implications. Many services experience fluctuations in the level of demand and this can result levels of demand which reduce the quality of the service experience. Service demand may be too high and result in service deterioration, for example: longer waits and rushed service with less personal attention. Or demand may be so low that the service lacks ambiance or doubts are created about the viability of the service.

quality control and product development role

The customer has an important market research role as a source of information about expectations for service design and quality improvement. Whether this information is collected proactively through systematic market research or reactively through complaints received, it is valuable for maintaining and improving service quality.

Service organisations can involve customers not just in assessing whether service is satisfactory or not, but also in identifying the criteria relevant to satisfaction appraisal. Bettencourt (1997), refers more broadly to the concept of the customer as an "organizational consultant", and emphasises that the customer is uniquely placed to guide the firm. Schneider and Bowen (1995) go even further when they propose that customers can usefully be involved in the design and operation of the firm. They write (p. 106) "Customers can serve as designers of policies and procedures as well as producers of their own services. Customers can also be involved in decisions regarding staffing, marketing, and operations. Involving customers in such ways can deepen the relationship between service businesses and customers - and make both more effective."

The role of the client can extend to participation in the service system as a whole. This may be particularly relevant to professional service development as frequently clients share their industry-specific knowledge with producers. Often this knowledge is, as Nachum (1999) points out, larger than the knowledge of the professional service producer. Normann (1991, p.82) goes so far as to state that "in professional service organisations such as consultancy firms, advertising agencies and auditors there is very little chance of developing genuine excellence in the service system unless the company is able to work together with knowledgeable and demanding clients."

The client can also be considered as a competitor. This may be seen in a negative sense by many service providers but understanding the client's role as a potential competitor can contribute to product development. For example, empowering the customer may permit a service provider to add more value by doing less. By understanding the factors which influence the client in the *internal* versus *external* exchange decision, the service provider can improve its strategic positioning.

green service quality collaborator role

Service quality can also be understood in an external sense meaning quality impact on third parties. This relates in particular to the environmental impact of service, and has been labelled the *green service quality dimension* by Gummesson (1992). Environmental problems are often perceived as occurring in the manufacturing

sector rather than in services, some services are, however, heavy users of transportation and energy sectors. Besides, the scope of meaning of the term "environmental impact" has a tendency to expand in service-related ways.

Service consumers are often required to participate in, or at least accept, green service initiatives. For example, McInerney and White (1997) describe a number of ways in which Inter-Continental hotels have sought to improve their green service quality, and explain the importance of carrying their guests with them in these actions. More recently (December 1999) some UK professional services firms adopted the ecological practice of not sending Christmas cards to clients but instead donating money to charities.

service leadership role

It has been suggested by Bowen that service customers may contribute to service quality by acting as substitutes for leadership. Schneider and Bowen (1995, p. 95) portray service customers as "directors, guides, and order givers for employees", and they assert that "employee satisfaction is associated just as much with the positive feelings employees receive from customers they serve as it is with anything they receive from their own supervisors" (p. 101).

Storbacka (1994) suggests that many professional service organisations rely on leadership from clients for motivating employees, defining activities and controlling quality. Normann (1991, p. 81) points out that cleaning companies which clean during office hours not only save on labour costs but also, by having cleaning done with the client present, incorporate some built-in quality control. Indeed, Normann also refers to the client having a '*maintenance of ethos*' function. He maintains that client participation and their interaction with contact staff can provide benefits to service employees "in terms of interesting experiences, excitement or valuation feedback".

customer:customer interaction role

Besides the interaction between service customers and employees which occurs within the service encounter, there is also the interaction between customers themselves. Other customers influence the atmosphere of the service system. Indeed in some service environments the behaviour and presence of other customers may have a more profound effect on service evaluation than contact with actual front-line employees.

The author is deeply engaged in researching the customer-to-customer relationship. The concept of on-site customer:customer interaction (cci) seems more applicable

to consumer services, but there are ways in which controlling the extent and nature of cci is relevant to professional services. The author plans a future paper on the meaning of cci in a professional service context.

Customers as co-producers of quality in the context of professional services

With regard to professional services the need for customer involvement varies. Clients provide important inputs to professional service producers. Clients typically introduce their problems and needs to the producer, but sometimes they do a lot more. Sometimes they have the option, like for many consumer services, of engaging in self-production. The adoption of the self-production option depends on considerations such as the in-house knowledge and skills in the professional service, and strategic/security reasons for maintaining control. Moreover, the degree of externalisation varies according to business service category. Eurostat (1997) studies reveal that: "financial review, engineering, operational services and advertising are externalised to a relatively high degree (more than 50 %). Combined internal and external provision of business services is used relatively often for legal and computing services. Because of its strategic importance, publicity and research and development services are provided internally."

Servqual studies suggest that professional service customers may desire more opportunity to input. Research has found a tendency of professionals to assume they know better than the customer, but this is due to professionals over focusing on technical issues. A number of studies have shown the customers of professional service providers to be capable not only of evaluating service quality but also of being competent to identify appropriate assessment criteria (Nicholls, 1999).

In professional services the client's role in quality control has traditionally been limited due to the fact that almost by definition professional services have some provision for quality control. This is usually exercised through professional bodies and has traditionally followed two basic approaches. The first element takes the form of selective membership and pre-entry socialisation via educational qualifications and examinations from both universities and the profession, with a view to restricting entry to those capable. The second element takes the form of governing bodies, codes of conduct and various directives, which provide a formal framework through which complaints or allegations from dissatisfied clients can be heard. Such provision encourages an atmosphere of contentment.

Professional service providers are often inclined, partly because of the professional body mentality, to view service quality as an outcome of the correct application of technical expertise and professional guidelines. This encourages an internal view of

quality, rather than an external approach based upon client expectations and perceptions (Morgan, 1994, p.206). In other words, professional service providers may have a tendency to focus on a notion of service quality which is different from that followed by other service providers. Given the nature of services, it has become the practise to define service quality in terms of user requirements rather than in terms of conformity to formal specifications. Those aspects of service quality deemed important by professionals frequently differ from the client's perspective. Indeed, as Witt and Steward (1996, p.22) point out, it is common for professionals to "underestimate the feeling of risk, uncertainty and vulnerability experienced by the client".

A British study (Witt and Steward, 1996) examined service quality in the legal profession. One of the main objectives of the research was to assess the extent to which solicitors had a good understanding of their customers' service expectations. Findings included: firms views of what service aspects were important frequently differed from clients' views; on some service aspects firms overestimated client expectations but still failed to satisfy them; in terms of performance firms frequently rated themselves more highly than clients did. This study supports the necessity for professional service providers to incorporate their clients as co-producers in quality assurance. This study and other studies reported in Nicholls (1999) provide clear evidence that some aspects of professional service quality are best judged upon by clients and not by the firms themselves.

From the professional service provider's perspective a useful concept may be the idea of an optimum level of client involvement, avoiding under-involvement and over-involvement. For example: legal advisors are sometimes expected by clients to make business decisions which are not based on legal criteria (i.e. the client is under-involved); legal advisors are sometimes expected to report everything to the client and this can sometimes be considered as over-involvement. Professional service providers need to be more aware as to what is their optimum level of client involvement and of the ways in which they can influence the client to conform.

Professional service providers should be flexible to their clients' propensity to be involved. This is of increasing importance given the growing international basis of producer services. Service providers need to adapt to cultural variation and its influence on client involvement propensity. A survey of EU business service provision provides evidence of the variation in degree of customer co-production roles from culture to culture.

The following table, based on a major EU study, gives some examples of how some of the more developed EU countries vary in their degree of externalisation:

**Table 2 The degree of business services externalisation in selected
EU countries**

	Externalization (%)	Internalization (%)	Combination (%)
France	56	30	14
Germany	32	47	21
Italy	47	33	18
Netherlands	39	18	43
United Kingdom	34	23	43

Source: Peat Marwick McLintock, *The 'Cost of Non-Europe' for business services*, Research on the 'Cost of Non-Europe', volume 8 , 1988, European Commission, Brussels.

The same study also found that use of external services depends much on company size. Small companies have a preference for internalization; medium -sized companies are more likely to externalize business services; large companies frequently use a combination. The following table shows the Peat Marwick McLintock findings:

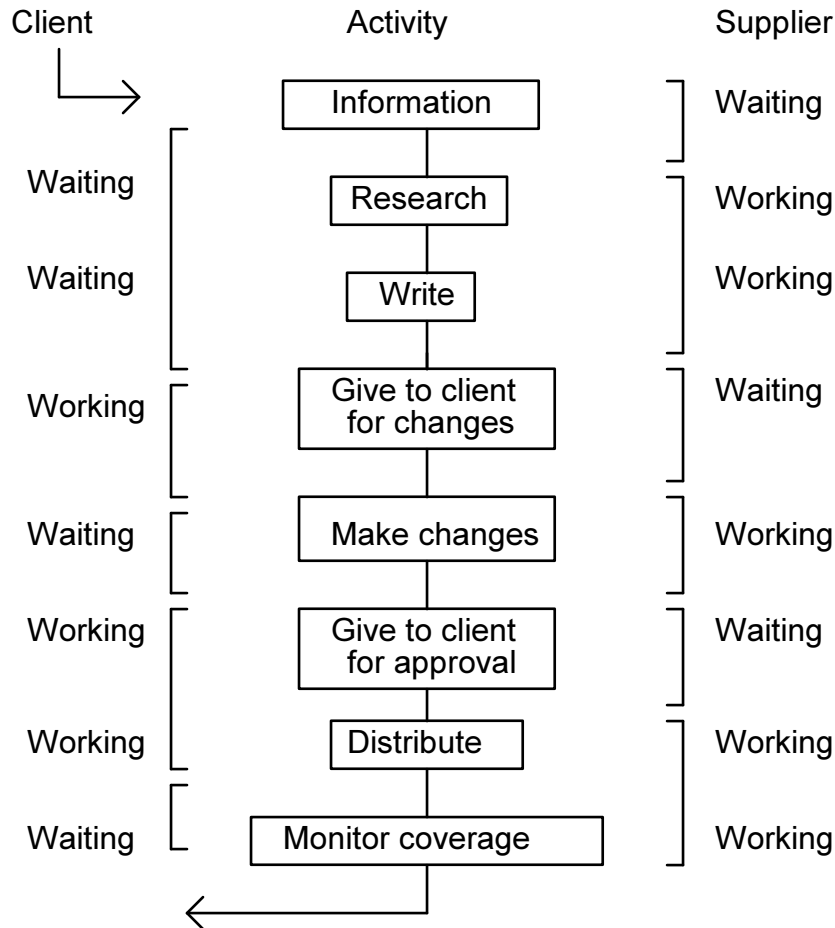
Table 3 Business services externalisation and company size

Company size (by employment)	Externalization (%)	Internalization (%)	Combination (%)
0 - 50	37	44	19
51 - 500	56	22	22
> 500	38	31	31
Total	42	31	27

Source: Peat Marwick McLintock, *The 'Cost of Non-Europe' for business services*, Research on the 'Cost of Non-Europe', volume 8 , 1988, European Commission, Brussels.

Understanding of a customer's activity cycle can provide insights into what type and level of involvement they may desire at different stages. Szmigin (1993) proposes charting the customer activity cycle as an aid to both customer and service provider in the planning and reviewing activity. Charting seems comparable with blueprinting which has long been advocated for service design. But as shown in figure 2, charting may be particularly useful in service co-production situation requiring close synchronisation of a series of tasks, where some tasks are provider-driven and other tasks are customer co-producer driven.

Figure 2 Press release activity cycle



source: Szmigin (1993, p. 515)

Identifying the customer's role in the activity cycle can be facilitated by considering the customer job tasks audit proposed by Canziani (1997, p. 9). Namely:

- What does the customer do in the process?
- How does the customer do it (technical and functional quality)?
- When does the customer do it (with respect to real time or during the process sequence, i.e. pre-transaction/transaction/post-transaction)?
- How often does the customer do it (frequent repeated discrete cycles versus infrequent steps in a continuous service relationship)?
- With whom does the customer interface (employees, machines or self)?

Canziani (1997, p. 10) also considers the question of how customer competency for task completion can be broken down, and suggests the following typology:

- a) Planning: assess personal needs for service
- b) Budgeting: assess available resources
- c) Communicating: tell service provider what needs are
- d) Directing: tell service provider how to provide service
- e) Co-ordinating: manage flow of self or possessions through service system
- f) Mediating: reduce transition gaps between service steps and employees
- g) Controlling: use feedback to ensure recovery and satisfaction
- h) Evaluating: use assessment devices in reliable manner

This typology is intended for both consumer and professional services. Whilst success in delivering service quality will be enhanced by customer competency in these areas, the customer should not be expected to tackle these tasks alone. Rather the service provider should consider the elements as a list of areas where they should be educating and supporting the customer.

Canziani's typology follows the general tendency in the customer participation literature to approach customer participation from a production input perspective. Kellogg, Youngdahl and Bowen (1997), on the other hand, focus on aspects of customer participation which are motivated by the customer's desire to obtain satisfaction and value. Their research, which includes empirical data collected using the critical incident technique for both consumer and professional services, develops a typology of the ways in which customers attempt to assure service quality. Kellogg, Youngdahl and Bowen identify four distinct forms of customer participation which are motivated specifically with the aim of assuring service satisfaction. These are:

- 1) *Preparation*: active planning for the service. For example: seeking referrals and researching competitors.
- 2) *Relationship building*: actively directing social behaviour and loyalty with a view to obtaining better service or special treatment. For example: getting to know service providers and asking for servers by name.
- 3) *Information exchange*: providing and seeking information to clarify service requirements and service status. For example: communicating to the service provider where the customer thinks a task may need particular care.
- 4) *Intervention*: providing negative performance feedback and getting involved in problem diagnosis and resolution. For example: not accepting a proposed advertising campaign.

Kellogg, Youngdahl and Bowen (1997, p. 211) emphasize that "facilitating customer behaviours such as preparation, relationship building and information exchange should reduce customers' perceived need to intervene in the delivery of service.". They propose that service providers can engage a range of human

resource and operational options in order to minimise the need for customers to engage in failure-related behaviours. For example: the provision of realistic service previews can assist customers in their co-production roles and reduce the need for customers to engage in quality assurance behaviour.

Earlier in this paper it was proposed that failure by the service provider to motivate adequate customer involvement increases the risk of customer dissatisfaction. Accordingly, professional service firms might gain insights by trying to better understand the nature of their clients. In order to do this they could usefully consider research on customer interaction styles. It may be fruitful to segment customers according to interaction style. Alreck (1994) maintains that recognising, understanding, and adapting to the interaction styles of clients will facilitate interaction. She identifies three client interaction styles and labels them (a) feeling-oriented style; (b) doing-oriented style; (c) owning-oriented style.

Likewise, strategies for increasing customer propensity to participate may be appropriate. Normann, one of the earliest writers to pay significant attention to the client as a co-producer, provides a check list of questions for 'client management' which may be used to consider ways of adjusting customer participation levels in order to enhance productivity and quality. Examples include (Normann, 1991 p. 88):

- Does the client have spare time while he is waiting?
- Are contact personnel doing repetitive work which the customer could do himself, for example with customer-operated machines?
- Do the clients sometimes try to 'get past' the contact personnel and do things themselves? Could that interest and knowledge be better utilised?
- Do the customers show interest in a knowledge about the tasks of the contact personnel?
- Is there a minority of customers which disturbs the service delivery system and its effectiveness?
- Can the customer be given an opportunity to choose between service levels?

Summary

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