

DEVELOPMENT OF CLIENT CARE INITIATIVES IN CONSTRUCTION CONTRACTING ORGANISATIONS

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Customer care begins from the moment they come into contact with the organisation to beyond the point customers become part of it. Customer care programmes involve a complex series of relationships between customers, individual employees and the organisation. They need to cover every aspect of the organisations operations in order to improve the quality of service to the customer. The concept of customer care has been widely used in manufacturing, service and public sector industries. Service organisations are particularly dependent on levels of customer care provided by their managers and staff.

Organisations in construction have been slow to develop customer or client care programmes which may provide a number of important benefits. It may help to differentiate them from the competition in highly competitive markets, improve perceptions of their clients and their professional advisors, increase client satisfaction with the services provided, encourage loyalty, and create a reputation for being a caring and client-orientated organisation. Internally, the construction company may benefit from improved staff morale, increased employee participation and foster internal customer/supplier relationships. By introducing a client care programme, a construction organisation may bring about continuous improvements to the operations of the organisation.

Keywords: Client, care, programmes, quality, service.

INTRODUCTION

The 1980s saw an upsurge in the development of customer care initiatives in the UK. It was a period when organisations found it increasingly difficult to differentiate their products and services from those of their competitors. Consequently, excellent service to the customer became a way of seizing a competitive advantage. Companies can confront their competition better if they can move from a 'product' and 'selling' philosophy, to a 'customer' and 'marketing' philosophy. They can win customers and outperform competitors by doing a better job of meeting and satisfying customers needs.

In the construction industry, little research has been conducted into service quality improvement. In terms of client care, there is no published material applied to construction companies. However, there is already some evidence of the application of client care policies in some construction companies. Its application is not, however, as well established as in other service industries such as telecommunications, banking and airlines.

Client care initiatives, or 'programmes', are designed to assist companies in differentiating themselves from their competitors, improving their image in the eyes of clients, increasing client satisfaction with the company's performance, encouraging word-of-mouth endorsement from satisfied clients, delivering 'products' that are 'right

first time', creating a reputation for being a caring and 'client-oriented' company, and making the company more profitable. It is argued that through widespread application of the client care principle, construction contractors will do much to improve their image and ensure repeat business from a more satisfied client base.

This paper will examine the existing literature on customer or client care and previous research conducted across the service sector. It will begin to apply the concepts and approaches to the case of construction contracting organisations and outline the issues raised through exploratory surveys.

BUILDING ON QUALITY

Numerous approaches to ensuring quality in the industrial process have been promoted. In recent years, with the growth of the service sector, the search for quality has spread to a wide range of service organisations (The Pollock Nisbet Partnership 1994).

The BS 5750 and ISO 9000 sets out how an organisation can establish, document and maintain an effective quality system that will demonstrate to the organisations customers that is committed to quality and is able to supply their quality needs. As such it advanced the quality movement from the previous focus on quality control, which concentrated on sifting out substandard products, to a position which concentrated on processes.

The quality assurance approach has been criticised for concentrating too much on 'production' and 'service delivery' processes, and not paying enough attention to identifying and meeting the needs of customers. Where the organisation is operating in a complex market where customer's needs change rapidly it is argued that the management of quality requires a broader approach.

At the same time as BS 5750 was being actively developed by manufacturing industries, service industries were developing a much greater awareness of their customers. In both the private and public sectors, organisations began to see the benefit of customer care initiatives and 'customer contracts' (The Pollock Nisbet Partnership 1994). BS 5750 was seen to have a major deficiency in that it judges an organisation against its own standards. There is no guarantee that the organisation will deliver quality in terms of what its customers want. In the words of Catterick (1992), (BS5750) "...does not certify the adequacy of the quality system and accreditation does not mean that Total Quality exists."

It is from this need to focus more upon the customer or client, that the interest in Total Quality Management (TQM), has grown. In comparing customer care with TQM, Daniels (1993) states that the aim of customer care is similar to that of a quality improvement programme, which is to consider the customer's perception of the service (which is often quite different from that of the supplier) and to use those perceptions as the basis on which to make improvement. Clutterbuck and Kernaghan (1991) take a slightly different view. They assert that whilst the two concepts make use of many similar techniques, particularly in "team-based problem solving", "...total quality is almost entirely about systems and procedures with the aim of producing consistency", while customer care focuses on changing the system and "establishing customer supportive attitudes and behaviour" and "controlled flexibility". Many companies that have embarked upon total quality programmes have subsequently launched customer care initiatives as well.

WHAT IS CLIENT CARE?

A review of the general literature established a range of views on the definition of customer or client care.

Cook (1992) considers customer care to be about management of “the total consumer experience of dealing with the producer.” This involves the producer in controlling and managing “customer confidence”, from the moment they are aware of the product or service to the point where they become part of it. Customer care is about “managing perceptions as well as realities”. Daniels (1993) asserts that these perceptions need to become the ‘base-point’ from which to make improvements to the service provided.

Clutterbuck (1988) assert that customer care is a fundamental approach to standards of service quality, covering every aspect of a company’s operations from design, packaging, delivery and service. Client care initiatives need to permeate every part and activity of an organisation (Bee and Bee 1995). It involves a complex series of relationships between customers, individual employees and the organisation. It is a means of “establishing customer-supportive attitudes and behaviour” (Clutterbuck and Kernaghan 1991). Customer or client care can be defined as the identification and management of critical incidents in which customers come into contact with the organisation and form their impressions of its quality and service. The organisation’s aim is to provide customer satisfaction (Thomas 1987).

Wellemin (1995) introduces the variety of tangible and intangible elements of customer care. Tangible elements include physical features of a product i.e. its size, colour etc. Intangible elements are more difficult to define and are related very much to the service provided. For example making the customer feel secure, trusting and well disposed towards the supplier and individual members of staff.

Smith and Lewis (1989) support these views and consider customer care to be a ‘philosophy’ of treating customers and clients well and keeping them informed. They also introduce the notion that implementation of the customer care philosophy is dependent on a change in the way that employees are cared for by the company, in terms of management style and working conditions.

From these broad definitions of customer or client care it may be seen that company initiatives need to integrate not only product and service quality, but marketing and personnel practices if they are to be successfully implemented. In essence, customer care is not only about improving systems and procedures but needs to become a guiding philosophy, part of the shared values, culture and mission of the company.

Application in other industries

The concept of customer care has been widely used in manufacturing, service and public sector industries. Blackman and Stephens (1993) recognise that the use of customer or client care initiatives in the public sector is on the increase due to the introduction of market forces. A paper by the Audit Commission (1988) argued that customer care would be essential if local authorities were to become ‘competitive’ and questioned whether councils viewed the public as customers with ‘views and choices’ which should be used in policy planning and implementation. The whole privatisation of public utilities has created a new emphasis on the customer. Major parts of the National Health Service (NHS) have undertaken quality and customer care programmes intended to re-orientated traditionally hierarchical and paternalistic based cultures into commercial enterprises (Cook 1992).

According to Clutterbuck and Kernaghan (1991), “sooner or later, effective total quality management programmes run into the problem that most customer complaints are to do with the quality of service. Customer care may be regarded as the next phase in the evolution towards a customer-oriented company.

DIMENSIONS IN CLIENT CARE

Contents of typical client care initiatives

For client care initiatives to be successful they need to span the entire organisation (Woodruffe 1995). Training of employees on a piecemeal basis will not be effective. It needs to be supported whole-heartedly by top management. There are typically six common elements to be found across successful customer care programmes (Clutterbuck and Kernaghan 1991).

1. **Decide the objectives and structure of the programme** - this is where top management should establish what the programme is supposed to achieve and outline its own role in making that happen.
2. **Audit the current situation** - the organisation attempts, usually through market research, to find out what customers think of the quality of service provided, both in absolute terms and vis-à-vis the customer. It also looks internally, asking employees what they consider would be most unsettling for the customer in doing business with their departments.
3. **Planning the programme** - this is frequently carried out in workshops that also present useful opportunities for team-building and for some problem-solving that will provide visible initial success.
4. **Defining policies and objectives** - this should occur at an early stage of planning and involves looking at the most obvious barriers to customer care.
5. **Preparing the ground through internal marketing.** In general, the bigger the change in culture and behaviour required, the greater the cynicism the employees will exhibit. To overcome that cynicism, top management has to communicate its intentions strongly and with conviction.
6. **Devise an appropriate training programme** aimed at all levels of management and staff, particularly those in direct contact with customers.

A two-stage process

Many companies perceive customer care as a two-stage process, in which the standard programme, largely oriented to training the front-line staff, is Stage 1. Stage 2 is the more comprehensive programme aimed at changing the entire organisation.

Stage 1, according to Clutterbuck and Kernaghan (1991), is frustrated because it is primarily aimed at changing behaviour of operators, shop assistants and other people in regular contact with the customer. Stage 2 is usually outside the scope of these people because issues are interdisciplinary, require high-level decisions or are entrapped in the politics of the organisation. Trying to change the company culture too rapidly creates covert resistance. This may not be felt to a great extent in Stage 1 but will become more apparent during Stage 2. Top management efforts may become diluted. Having made Stage 1 work, top management may focus on other problems.

Stage 2 is far harder than Stage 1, because it reaches into more fundamental areas of the organisation - management style, organisation, structure and systems. It has to be driven from all directions - downwards, upwards and horizontally. People at the

customer interface need to become much more involved in gathering information that leads to action. This may be within their own span of control, but much may lie outside this sphere and will require action from above. This puts pressure on the middle manager to become less of a department manager and more of a multi-functional team player.

Organising an effective client care programme

According to Clutterbuck and Kernaghan (1991), the main reasons why customer care programmes fail is that the company does not enter them with a full appreciation of, and commitment to, the scale of change that is required. Customer care, like TQM programmes have to start as top-down exercises. This is essential for role models to be provided and to ensure overall direction and commitment to enforce the level of training and participation required to make the programme a success. Cook (1992) adds that many businesses discover that a campaign to merely enhance staff skills, to tackle service quality improvements from the bottom up, does not go far enough because it does not change the prevailing attitudes at management level.

An alternative view by Daniels (1993) is that adopting a customer care approach makes an organisation concentrate on the front-line staff, (normally at the bottom of a pyramid management structure), and work back through the customer chain, involving the internal customer-provider relationships, developing more effective means of providing and enhancing the various products or services in line with customer needs.

According to Daniels (1993), in a company there is a front line in which staff have direct contact with the final purchasers of the service, and then a series of interfaces within the organisation where one member of staff (or a team) provides an internal service to another. There is thus a “customer-supplier” chain which stretches back from the end (external) customer to the point at which a product or service is designed and specified. The front line service can be improved and maintained only if all other service points are improved and maintained. The front-line service is the nearest to the customer, but is not necessarily the largest determinant of perceived good service.

Cook (1992) also asserts that it is important that the customer care initiative should not be seen to be emanating from any one particular department i.e. marketing or training but that it should be positioned very much from the overall strategic level.

Implementation of the programme

Clutterbuck and Kernaghan (1991), emphasis that the whole customer care process must start with a clear vision. This has to be gradually built and enhanced through gathering information from four key sources: customers, employees, competition and other business sectors. A customer oriented strategy is the first building-block in remaking the company. The ultimate aim is to have an operation which responds rapidly to changing customer needs, is proactive, anticipating or creating needs and having a planned approach to meeting them. The organisation has to be staffed by people who think “customer service”. Clutterbuck and Kernaghan (1991) assert that the organisation will need to change its structures, systems and standards in line with this vision. This has to be matched by attitudinal and behavioural changes in the workforce.

Interfaces between management, customers, and the system

Management needs to create a service strategy which distinguishes the company from its competitors. This needs to be clearly communicated to both the employees and the

customer. Management must also ensure that the organisation structure and system are customer-oriented.

Undoubtedly the front-line staff have the highest level of contact with customers. They should be aware and understand the customer's needs and expectations on an individual basis. The customer will assess the company's service on the basis of the staff they come into contact with. The staff who do not come into direct contact with customers need to realise that they are supporting those who do and therefore need to be viewed as internal customers.

The interface between management and staff internally is crucial to the level and standards of service delivered externally. Training in customer care skills internally, as well as externally, is essential.

The external customer comes into contact with the company system and procedures. The system needs to be user-friendly and take into account how the customer will use it and not be designed purely at the convenience of the company.

Management within the company needs to seek improvement to its systems and procedures. Identifying those elements that must be performed in the customer's presence will ensure that non-essential elements be carried out away from the customer. The layout of any premises used for the service, has a profound effect on the atmosphere which is created within the service organisation.

Operating procedures, recruitment, attitudes and behaviour

Clutterbuck and Kernaghan (1991) suggest three golden rules which will normally help maintain a balance between bureaucracy and slackness:

- keep the rules short and simple and focused on priorities,
- involved employees in drawing up and monitoring procedures and in explaining these to new recruits to the company,
- express the rules in a positive language.

Changing the attitudes and behaviour of staff is very difficult. Critical in creating customer-oriented attitudes for people already within an organisation are;

- a feeling of responsibility, of being valued and supported,
- an understanding of who the customers are, what they need, what the organisation's customer-oriented strategy is and their individual plan to achieve it.

A company embarking on a customer or client care programme needs to first gather information on the attitudes of its employees. An 'attitude audit' needs to establish whether the company is creating the kind of climate where customer care can flourish. Is the organisation listening to what customers and employees are saying?

Piloting, steering, introducing and servicing the programme

Cook (1992) claims that research into organisations that have successfully applied customer care programmes reveal that the approach chosen to introduce the initiative often determines its success. One means is to introduce a pilot scheme, which may be useful in dealing with initial resistance. Through identifying a part of the organisation which is typical in structure, to be used as a model, an illustration can be made of the success which may be brought about through the entire enterprise. A steering group of influential and representative members should be drawn from all parts of the

organisation whose role it is to implement the programme. In finally introducing the programme a number of techniques are identified including;

- workshops and seminars with senior management,
- day or half-day events where all management and staff attend,
- team meetings,
- staff announcements,
- videos.

Clutterbuck and Kernaghan (1991) recommend a series of measures in order to build a genuine customer-oriented organisation including the need for effective communication and for top management to evaluate how the programme is progressing

PREVIOUS RESEARCH INTO CLIENT CARE

A small number of studies have been conducted into the application of client care initiatives in the legal profession, local authorities, banks, building societies, insurance companies, retailers and the leisure and travel industries. One study examined client care in the housing industry. These studies have provided guidance on the possible subjects of research and the type of data collection methods to be used when applied to construction contracting.

Witt and Stewart (1996) investigated assessment of service quality in the legal profession and attempted to establish gaps between clients expectations and solicitors' beliefs about those expectations. They used the SERVQUAL instrument (Parasuraman et al 1985) to highlight shortfalls between expectations and what was being delivered by legal practices. The study used focus groups and questionnaires of clients and practices.

Blackman and Stephens (1993) researched the application of client care in the Treasurers Department of Newcastle City Council. This study was in response to the Audit Commission's report on the "Competitive Council". The authors undertook to analyse change between the start of the client care programme in 1989 and the end of the main phase of activity in 1992. Both internal customers and staff were invited to fill in the different sets of questionnaires. The study also used focus groups and interviews.

Smith and Lewis (1989) interviewed key personnel at the head offices of organisations representing a variety of service industries to identify the development of client care and service programmes and the way in which the philosophy was beginning to permeate from top management through to branches and customer contact staff. The study also involved examination of training materials used by firms including videos and training booklets.

The only construction related study identified from this literature search was the work of the Pollock Nisbet Partnership (1994). This research was carried out for Scottish Homes and involved identifying the 'state of the art' in client care in housing management. The scope of the project was a review of client care initiatives carried out in the North and South District of Scottish Homes and included examination of initiatives carried out by other housing managers and across industries.

In the context of client care in housing management, the sample frame consisted of a sample group of customers i.e. tenants, owner occupiers, people on the waiting list and internal customers within Scottish Homes. The Pollock Nisbet Partnership The

Pollock and Nisbet Partnership also examined studies in four other service industries, Royal Mail, Scottish Power plc, Customs and Excise and Strathclyde PTE (public transport) and adopted a research methodology which involved qualitative surveys to determine important aspects of service and index measurements of performance.

The Scottish Homes assessment measured the level of satisfaction with specific aspects of their services as follows;

- communications with tenants (by telephone, face-to-face etc.).
- area office environment.
- personalising of the service (badges, photo directory etc.).
- complaints procedure and handling.

RESEARCH INTO CLIENT CARE IN CONSTRUCTION CONTRACTING

Research Aims

The research which has been commenced aims to identify;

- how contractors define client care and whether they have an understanding of the need for external and internal client orientation,
- the current position with regard to the development of client care initiatives in construction contracting,
- the techniques by which client care initiatives are being implemented,
- the level and content of any training programmes to support client care,
- the existence and role of ‘customer care’ staff in contracting organisations,
- client-contact staff in contracting organisations at different stages of the projects and how services may be improved for external and internal clients,
- how contractors may have measured the success of such initiatives and problems encountered during implementation.

Who is the client in construction?

The clients in construction are not ‘uniform’ or ‘average’ organisations. The objectives of one client organisation may be quite different from those of another. Turner (1997) considers clients across five categories; property and development companies, investors, occupiers, local and central government authorities and quangos. Each type of client has different priorities, needs and expectations of the construction service and will require different approaches. An aim of client care must be to add value to the client and their business.

In addition to the ‘end-user’, the construction client team includes many different types of consultants who offer design and cost control services. It is important to establish their ‘buying behaviour’. The involvement of the client team provides for a much greater involvement in the service than in other service industries.

Contractors need to know how their services, marketing efforts, managers and staff, facilities and brand image affect clients and their advisors perspectives. They also need to know how the competition are perceived. The firm in practice needs to establish why the client continues to negotiate and place contracts with them. Is this merely repeat business and just how loyal is the client? This information needs to be incorporated into the client care programme.

The only way to find out whether a company has met, or indeed exceeded client expectations, is by asking them. This should identify strengths and weaknesses in the service experienced, and will aid in improving processes in the future.

Who's on the 'front-line' in contracting?

Essentially anyone who comes into contact with clients and/or their advisors may be considered to be in the 'front-line'. Contact with the client commences with early meetings, telephone conversations, interviews and presentations during the pre-qualification phase of projects and continues through negotiations and tendering procedures, the award of the contract, construction stage, completion of the building or structure and during the after-care phase. The front line staff in contracting will change throughout the different stages. Unlike other industries, 'client-contact' staff will be at almost all levels in the company, from director level down to labourers.

The front-line is drawn from a variety of different functions and departments of the business which need to be co-ordinated and view each other as internal customers. The client care initiative will need to be driven from director level down if the required level of change to attitudes and behaviour is to be achieved, and if an 'internal marketing' culture is to be established. The client care initiative would aim to improve the quality of services provided by the project and site managers and others during their interface throughout these processes. It would involve identifying the needs of clients during these phases and where improvements were necessary in the service provided by front-line and support staff.

From the literature search conducted only one published example of the application of these techniques was identified. This was the case of McNicholas Construction (Contract Journal 1998). This organisation launched the "McNicholas CARES" initiative, which urged employees of the company to be more pro-active. "CARES" is a mnemonic from the words customer, awareness, respect, enterprise, excellence, enthusiasm and solution. McNicholas formed a series of focus groups of customers to identify their needs. The aim was to try and get "close to the customer" and to give a better service particularly to the firm's clients in the water industry. The firm was reported to be winning work in Europe due to its established reputation for commitment to serving its customers.

INITIAL EXPLORATORY SURVEY WORK

The researchers have conducted several exploratory interviews with senior marketing managers in contracting organisations, to support their theoretical development. The important issues to emerge from these in-depth discussions were as follows:

- Companies acknowledged the need for good staff-to-client interfaces during all stages of the construction project, but there is little evidence that comprehensive care programmes are being implemented.
- Some companies have commenced training of staff in telephone behaviour and limited use of training packages has been identified.
- Research is required into the level, and control, of service provided during direct staff-to-client interfaces.
- There is a need for better co-ordination and co-operation across the different departments or functions in contracting to improve the overall service delivered to clients.

- A number of contractors have appointed 'customer care' managers and have allocated single points of contact for particular types of client.
- Whilst respondents acknowledged the differences between contracting and other industries, it is felt that customer care initiatives used in service industries such as airlines, banking or telecommunications could be useful in developing programmes in construction.

Issues which may frustrate development of client care

Management of quality, marketing and the human resource are relatively underdeveloped areas in the construction industry. Contractors have generally been 'product' or 'sales' oriented as opposed to 'customer' or 'marketing' led. Emphasis has therefore been on quality of the end-product i.e. the building or structure rather than on developing services which meet the expectations of the client.

The standard of service in providing construction projects is often affected by major conflicts and disputes between the parties, rather than a partnership culture focusing on satisfying the clients needs and wants. Much of this conflict is associated with the professional culture of the industry which has traditionally divided design from construction and has perpetuated mistrust on all sides - the 'them' and 'us' syndrome.

The people in contact with the client in construction change during the course of a project. This is often due to the time it takes to move a project from initial inception, through the pre-qualification and tendering stages and beyond. This places great emphasis on all a contractor's personnel being trained to be 'caring' to the client team. In addition, sub-contracting and out-sourcing of responsibilities, makes it more difficult to control the way the client team is being served.

Clients' perceptions of contractors are 'coloured' by the overall image of the industry. Attempts to introduce client care initiatives are likely to be dismissed as purely marketing gimmicks, and not taken seriously by the client team.

Given the low profit margin in contracting, client care programmes are likely to be viewed as too expensive to implement.

CONCLUDING COMMENTS

Client care begins from the moment clients and their advisors come into contact with the construction company, to beyond the point when they become part of the service. It is a philosophy which needs to pervade every part of the construction enterprise and requires an emphasis on training if it is to be effectively implemented.

Client care involves complex relationships and interfaces between clients and their advisors, individual managers and the organisation, covering every aspect of the organisations operations throughout the life of a construction project.

The aims of client care are to increase the satisfaction of clients and their advisors to ensure repeat business and client loyalty. This image will improve word-of-mouth endorsements of the contractor and should ensure success during the pre-qualification stage.

Most contractors have applied Quality Assurance procedures and many would seem to have identified the need to develop this further towards a total quality approach. However, there is little indication that the philosophy of client care is being implemented through comprehensive client care programmes, or that the benefits of such an approach has been identified and appreciated by companies.

It is important to note that despite the significance of customer care to service companies such as contractors, very little has been written about the subject in construction. This on-going research aims to explore the topic further, partly through surveys of contractors to establish whether they are developing client care programmes and the type and level of training they may be using.

The principles of customer or client care outlined in this paper can be applied to companies operating as contractors in the construction industry, taking into account the specific nature of the 'client', the market and competitive environment in construction. As stated earlier, customer or client care initiatives require an integrated approach to service quality, marketing and personnel (human resource) management. These areas are underdeveloped in the construction industry and it will require a significant change in the business culture of contracting organisations for implementation of client care initiatives to be successful.

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