The Role of e-learning in Post Sales Service.  
A Customer Loyalty Tool.

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ABSTRACT

Today's society is characterized by rapid changes in working environment. This has developed the need for companies to qualify for internal and external customers fast and efficiently within any sector. E-learning has become particularly important to solve this need. The characteristics of e-learning perfectly fit in with the flexibility demanded by the customer. At the same time, e-learning offers a close relationship with the client, which can be used as a marketing tool to gain customer loyalty and to spread company information.

Keywords: e-learning, Satisfaction, Loyalty, Client, Post-sales Service.

1. INTRODUCTION

Nowadays the concept of e-learning has become an essential tool to fight the crisis and adapt to market needs. E-learning provides both the company and the employee with the most efficient methodology to improve working conditions. The growing request for training and formation caused by the changing environment, and the need to combine academic and professional development, increases the general demand for online methodology learning [10][13]. However, business training is not only addressed to company employees or internal customers, but to external customers and consumers.

On the other hand, loyalty development has been an objective traditionally aimed at by managers [1]. Some terms like satisfaction [17], commitment [8], perceived value [11] and perceived quality [2] favor higher loyalty in the consumer [5]. In this paper we analyze why the use of free courses must be increasingly used in after-sales services. These courses offer the client the essential training to use the contracted product, and, besides, the seller can show other products that may interest the customer, making the customer-supplier relationship stronger. We describe in which ways this formation has an impact on usability and satisfaction, concepts which have a direct and positive influence on consumer loyalty [5].

2. THEORETICAL BACKGROUND

E-learning has become a more and more used method by people and enterprises that look for training, because of the flexibility it provides in terms of time and place. This choice is determined by the usability, utility and credibility perceived by the user before the execution of the course [7]. In fact, these factors are predefined by the precedence of the user; e.g., in case the user is an engineer familiarized with technology use, it usually results in a higher level of acceptance.

E-learning success depends on many factors, being usability, quality and continued usage (continuance) the most critical issues [6]. But this success is definitely determined by final user satisfaction, characterized by the factors mentioned [6]. Online courses have a larger withdrawal rate than the traditional learning processes [12][16][19], since, despite of the fact that the students have more flexibility, the requirement of self-commitment to finish successfully the course is also greater.

The vast majority of authors on this topic agree on the fact that consumer satisfaction can determine the
continuance or withdrawal of the course [22], and technology itself does not impact on final satisfaction [4], but a negative effect on it, making communication flow difficult, will damage the learning process, discouraging and generating slackness about the online course [21].

Expectancy Disconfirmation Theory or Disconfirmation of Expectation Theory originally considered that repurchase intention is based on user’s satisfaction [15]. Some studies include previous user’s experience and user’s expectations as factors influencing final satisfaction and therefore, repurchase intention [6].

Satisfaction can be defined as “an affective consumer condition that results from a global evaluation of all the aspects that make up the consumer relationship” [20]. The concept can be divided into two distinct perspectives [9]. The first perspective considers satisfaction as an affective predisposition sustained by economic conditions, such as the volume of sales or profit margins obtained. The second vision, known as non-economic satisfaction, considers the concept using more psychological factors, such as a partner fulfilling promises or the ease of relationships with the aforementioned partner.

On this second point of view is on which usability impacts the most. Usability can be defined as “a quality attribute that assesses how easy user interfaces are to use” [14]. As it happened with the success and acceptance of online formation [6][7], usability will be a crucial point affecting directly on consumers’ satisfaction and loyalty [5].

Thus, it can be considered that, if these two factors are improved, customer’s repurchase intention will be reoriented.

3. HYPOTHESES AND METHODOLOGY

We can raise a new model based on the Theory of the Expectancy Disconfirmation or Disconfirmation of Expectation Theory, including the modifications mentioned above (see figure 1). This new model includes a new element (e-learning effects) that modifies the user’s perception and user’s course expectation about the products/services acquired by him.

In this new scenery we propound the following hypothesis:

- H1. The execution of courses about products or services acquired by the customer can improve the perception in quality, usability and perceived value.
- H2. The mentioned courses can enhance and clarify the user’s expectations about the new acquired product.
- H3. These factors can act as a force of progress and loyalty in client-supplier relationship, improving costumers’ familiarity with providers’ products and services.

4. ANALYSIS

The scenery proposed in this paper is one in which a person or a company has consumed a product or service, and the seller offers him/her a post-sale service. This service, in addition to the traditional ones, could include a complimentary formation course on the use of the purchased product or service.

Online courses must be oriented to show more deeply the products and services bought by a client. They can enlighten its characteristics and use, the advantages and drawbacks and the expected benefits. Thus, a broader knowledge of the products can improve the user’s perception. Moreover, significant benefit should arise as users gain familiarity with the products, what affect on consumer judgment [3], due to influences on the set of variables which consumers consider when coming to a decision.

The strategy of online-courses can be determined to foster the use of products/services of a company, and to boost new needs to be catered. This strategy is used to show the portfolio of products in a didactical way, as well as the relationship between them, promoting its advertising and, consequently, increasing sales.

By validating the Theory of the Expectancy Disconfirmation or Disconfirmation of Expectation Theory, we can establish that if courses can enhance client’s expectation and perception, they will also increase the intention of use. Therefore, we could build customer loyalty and put a wider offer of products on the market.

![Figure 1: Expectancy disconfirmation theory (Chao-Min Chiu et al. 2004) with e-learning effects](Image)
Some of the reviewed authors add reputation as a factor affecting directly on consumer loyalty [5], as well as usability and satisfaction, impacting on company’s profitability. In fact, the most reputed firms are the most profitable too [18].

However, these courses may also have a negative effect. As explained above, some studies reveal that online methodology is more flexible in terms of time and place, but it also has a high rate of dissatisfaction and withdrawal [12][16][19]. For this reason, a course designed to promote the image of a product must be carefully designed, otherwise it could have the opposite effect.

The design of online courses is a process that must be cautiously developed. In this case, introducing it within the marketing strategy of a company makes the process even more complex. Aspects such as the corporate image and the customer strategy have to be taken into account, so that the contents of the courses and the attention to students reflect them. It is strongly recommended that both product and sales managers participate in the generation of contents process. The aim of this is giving both points of view of the product or service: how to take advantage of the product/service in a more effective way (product), and a commercial view of the product and its relation with others, that can result in new sales opportunities (sales).

5. DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS

The introduction of courses in post-purchase services may have a beneficial effect, as it influences client’s perception and expectancy. The Theory of the Expectancy Disconfirmation or Disconfirmation of Expectation Theory studied in the reviewed articles focuses on expectation and quality perception, usability and value, but there exist other issues that can affect satisfaction, or that can be predetermined by them.

In order to validate this model, a real case study should be implemented. It would consist on a sample of companies offering products or services which can have a related formation course, so to analyze the differences in similar profile costumers who have and who have not experienced the online post-sale service.

When measuring the effect an online training course has on its students, some indicators relating to the quality of the course can be easily considered by asking directly to the users: students’ overall satisfaction, obtained knowledge, interest of the course as it has been developed, and other kind of parameters indicating the quality of the course perceived by the users. However, in this case, what we really want to calculate is the impact the course has in the customer level. This belongs to a higher degree.

A way of measuring this effect is by making questionnaires and personal interviews, in order to contrast if the costumer’s perception (corporate image of the company, perceived utility of the product, overall impression and satisfaction of the process...) has been enhanced by this methodology.

The main purpose of the paper was to propose a theoretical model relating success factors of online training courses with other authors’ investigations on studies dealing with the Theory of the Expectancy Disconfirmation. Common parameters in both investigation lines have been appreciated, so that the development of one of them can benefit from the other. In the absence of a practical validation of the model, at least from a theoretical point of view, we can conclude that the method of using online courses to improve customer’s loyalty is valid.

Limitations: This study is a theoretical model based on researches and revisions made by other authors. This model should be verified with the development of a local study based on surveys and interviews.

This model does not make a research about costumers’ profiles, as those people from segments of the population with knowledge and mastery on new technologies (young people in general, technicians, engineers, etc.) are more prone to accept this kind of online courses, therefore, they are familiarized with them. Nevertheless, it must be also be pointed out that some segments of the population do not feel comfortable with this services because they are offered online, so it should be taken into account the option of complementing them with more traditional courses and relations to avoid rejections or neglects.

6. REFERENCES


