

# **The reality of customer service within small retailer in Donegal**

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# Chapter One

## Introduction

### 1.1 Introduction

“Merely satisfying customers will not be enough to earn their loyalty. Instead, they must experience exceptional service worthy of their repeat business and referral. Understand the factors that drive this customer revolution” (Tate, Parker & Hail, 1995)

The title for this research paper is “The reality of customer service within small retailers in Donegal”.

This area of customer service has been chosen as the researcher has a keen interest in the area and is currently employed in the retail sector on a part time capacity. The researcher feels from her experiences in the sector, the area needs more attention in relation to small retail outlets. Owner/Managers of small retail outlets should pay more attention to customer service which will help them to succeed in this economic climate. The researcher has experience with a successful entrepreneur who is an expert in the area of customer service. He states “Companies can’t manage what they don’t measure” (Boyle, 2012) this important quote explains to retailer that if they are not measuring the customer service how they can provide excellent customer service.

Serving customers well is at the heart of marketing as well as supporting a company’s position in a competitive market. Twomey (2012) stated “A customer-oriented organisation is committed to providing the best possible service for its customers. It does this by listening to its customers, assessing their needs and wants, and then meeting those needs and wants. It maintains good communication between the organisation, its customers and its employees. It

is constantly monitoring situations and offering feedback. A customer-orientated organisation wants its customers to be happy and is pleased to be of service to them”.

Scheuing (1999) in his quote demonstrates that “Customers are the lifeblood of any organisation. Without them, it loses its meaning and purpose” and Zikmund and D’Amico (1989) support this belief further, “Customer satisfaction is the aim of the marketing concept. According to the marketing concept, an organisation should try to satisfy the needs of customers or clients through coordinated set of activities that, at the same time, allows the organisation to achieve its goals”.

## **1.2 Research Objectives**

The aim for this research is to investigate the perceived level of customer service being delivered in the outlets by the owner/ manager compared with the actual delivery of customer service from the customer perspective. Parasuraman, Berry, and Zeithaml (1991), the expected service quality may not be answered because of constraints, thus, the perceived service for customers can be different from what expected. They stated that “In short, a variety of factors – resource constraints, market conditions, and/or management indifference may result in discrepancies between management perceptions of consumer expectations and the actual specifications established for a service. This discrepancy is predicted to affect quality perceptions of customers. The researcher aims to develop a model for small retailer in Donegal to help them implement customer service training into their organisation and suggestions on how to measure or monitor the customer service being delivery.

The sub objectives of this research are:

- To examine the quality of customer service delivery within the selected retail companies.

- To explore the important attributes of customer service from a customer's perspective.
- To uncover gaps in the perceived level of customer service delivery compared to the actual delivery.
- To evaluate the importance of customer care programs in the enhancement of customer service delivery.

### **1.3 Value of Study**

The area of customer service is of particular interest to the researcher because of the time spent within industry as a frontline staff member and from past studies. This experience provides the correct knowledge and determination to write a dissertation on the reality of customer service within small retailer in Donegal through qualitative research. The researcher has awareness and understanding of the industry to discover themes that the researcher believes is corrected. From reading past research and studies the researcher feels customer service is a very important element of business and marketing, and feels that customer service should become a focus for small retailers in Donegal.

From a recent published industry report from Retail Excellence Ireland it stated there was a drop of 6.89% in retail industry sales from September 2010 to July 2011 (Retail Times, 2011).

This indicates to small retail businesses the current position of the market they serve.

With this in mind small retail outlets in Donegal should consider the customer and the delivery of its customer service as a means to maintain and develop its customer base in these difficult economic times.

Jones and Sasser (1995) suggest that in order to survive in a highly competitive market, organisations need to provide excellent customer service that yield highly satisfied and loyal customers. They are more likely to return to those who helped them, while dissatisfied customers are more likely to go elsewhere. The retention of very loyal customers is the key to organisational survival.

This is echoed by Dixon *et al.* (2010) whose research has some interesting facts for companies who deliver poor customer service.

*Dixon et al., (2010, p. 116) identified that poor customer service not only drives customers to exit but they can also deter potential new customers as research shows:*

'25% of customers is likely to say something positive about their customers' service experienced. 23% of customers who had a positive service interaction told ten or more people about it; whereas, 65 % of customers are likely to speak negatively. 48% of customers who had a negative experience told ten or more customers'.



## Chapter Two

### The Literature Review

#### 2.1 Introduction

The research conducted for this literature review has been gathered from academic journals, books and through the internet. The areas chosen to explore throughout the literature are the importance of a customer to the company, service quality and customer care programmes.

These three main heading were formed to help the researcher answer the research objectives and to achieve the research.

The first heading will deal with the importance of the customer to the company. This will be an important area for the company as the research conducted will highlight what the company needs to be doing in order to satisfy the customer, establish relationship and marketing which will ensure business survival. There is number of different authors to help proved this phenomena such as Dixon *et al.* (2010).

The second heading will discover the effect of the quality of the service. This is investigating the quality of customer service being delivered by the companies. It will discover the gaps model and servqual in the research with the main authors being Parasuraman, A., Zeithaml, V. A., and Berry, L. (1990).

The third heading in the literature review customer care programmes. This was developed by the researcher to examine the importance of training and improvement in customer service delivery. The main authors which is included in this section is Twomey (2012) and Cook and Mc Caulay (2008).

Twomey (2012, p. 2) defined customer service ‘as the provision or service of a sufficient quality and in sufficient manner that reaches or exceeds the customer expectations’.

The customer service from the employee’s perspective focuses mainly on customer orientation, and the dimensions of service quality as perceived by their customers.

Employees’ customer service orientation is defined as their willingness and ability to deliver excellent customer service and adjust their service delivery to meet the customer’s needs and preferences (Brady and Cronin, 2001; Lytle et al., 1998).

“There is only one boss, and whether people shines shoes for a living or are the head of the biggest corporation in the world, the boss remains the same. It is the customer. The customer is the person who pays everyone’s salary and who decides whether a business is going to succeed or fail. In fact, the customer can fire everybody in the company from the chairman (CEO) on down, and he can do it simply by spending his money somewhere else. Literally everything we do, every concept perceived, every technology developed and associate employed, is directed with this one objective clearly in mind – pleasing the customer” (Walton 1973, cited by De Contreras, 2008).

## **2.2 The importance of the customer to the company**

Barlow and Stewart (2006, p. 19) maintains, ‘a simple friendly hello using a customer’s name and a quick response to an email can send a non-verbal message that reinforces a larger more complicated promise: “We are big enough to meet your immediate business needs while we are small enough to know you”...’ This helps create the message that customer is important to the business.

A study in the area of customer service and expectations, conducted by Dixon *et al.* (2010) ‘to meet customer service expectations, reps should anticipate and head off the need for follow-up calls, address the emotional side of the interaction, minimise the need for customers to switch service channels, listen to and learn from disgruntled customers, and focus on problem solving, not speed’.

Hoopes (2010, P.80-84) is of the opinion, that leadership styles demonstrated by managers impacts the level of service their staff give to their customers, ‘your words, deeds and general interface with your team of employees attitudes and opinions about the importance of maintaining satisfied customers. If negative, you simply need to acknowledge it. Making changes for the better will also take time’.

Keh and Teo (2001, p.370-371) states ‘far from being passive buyers, customers are becoming close collaborators in the service encounters, contributing suggestions and feedback to improve the service delivery. There has been growing managerial interest in customer roles because the effectiveness of customer participation at all levels will impact on organisational productivity’.

Guinea (2006) states that the qualities of customer service that are needed should be emphasised continually to ensure customer wants are satisfied. After years of market research, it turns out customers are constantly internalizing their customer service experience. What this means is they are grading your customer service during each transaction but you rarely know it. While there are a multitude of customer needs, six basics needs stand out:

- Friendliness – the most basic and associated with courtesy and politeness.
- Empathy – the customer needs to know that the service provider appreciates their wants and circumstances.

- Fairness – the customer wants to feel they receive adequate attention and reasonable answers.

- Control – the customer wants to feel his/her wants and input has influence on the outcome.

- Information – customers want to know about products and services but in a pertinent and time-sensitive manner.

Customer service refers to the processes and actions that make it easier for customers to do business with a company (Kotler, 2000).

Winer (2001) argues that in building successful relational exchanges with the customers, there is a need to understand customer behaviours and to focus on those customers who can deliver long term profits to a firm.

As previous literature expressed how important the customer is to a business it is also important for company to build relationships with customers. The following literature will explain in terms how important it is for a company to establish these relationships with its customers.

Ndubisi (2004) reported that more and more firms are capitalising on strong firm-customer relationship to gain invaluable information on how best to serve customers and keep them from defecting to competing brands. Hence, customer relationship building creates mutual rewards (Rapp and Collins, 1990) which benefit both the firm and the customer. By building relationship with customers, an organisation can also gain quality sources of marketing intelligence for better planning of marketing strategy.

Ndubisi (2004) has suggested that companies should make sacrifices and worthwhile investments in building relationships with loyal, or at least potentially loyal, customers.

Cook (2011) explains ‘Only best practice organisation have customer retention levels higher than 70 per cent. Put another way, most organisations lose significantly more than 30 per cent of customers before, or at the time of repurchase decision, mainly through poor service’. This is so important for a company to maintain excellent customer service delivery to have high number of repeat customer. Cook (2011) again repeat the importance of this by explaining “A company’s ability to attract and retain new customers therefore is a function not only of its product or product offering but also the way it services its existing customers and reputation it creates within and across marketplaces”.

From Kotler’s (2003) point of view, a company need do discriminatory behaviour between their customers (regular and non-regular) to create loyalty. These customers have earn most advantage from company suggests. Nonetheless, every company should goal setting to create loyal customer, but loyalty have never be so strength that customers do not accept those competitor suggestion that have more value (Kotler, 2003).

Organisations that consistently satisfy their customers enjoy higher retention levels and greater profitability due to increased customers’ loyalty, Wicks & Roethlein, (2009, p.83).

This is why it so vital to keep consumers satisfied and this can be done in different ways and one way is by trying to know their expectations and perceptions of services offered by companies.

According to Huddleston et al., (2008, p.65) if the shopping experience provides qualities that are valued by the consumer then satisfaction is likely to result. This clearly pinpoints the importance quality when carrying out purchase and this relates to grocery stores that offer variety of products with different quality. Fornell, (1992, p.11) clearly defines customer

satisfaction as an overall post-purchase evaluation by the consumer and this is similar to that of Tse & Wilton, (1988, p.204) who defined customer satisfaction as the consumer's response to the evaluation of the perceived discrepancy between prior expectations and the actual performance of the product or service as perceived after its consumption.

Trust is another important factor for the company needs to build with customer which helps build relationship. It will also help company to understand the customer expectation and perceptions.

The level of trust achieved between customer and owner/managers is an important criterion facilitating evaluation of relationship strength (Ndubisi 2004). Trust mediates satisfaction-commitment link (Ulaga and Eggert 2004). In addition, trust reduces the apprehended by customers risk emerged from transactions and is the main variable towards successful relationship (Boersma, Buckley and Ghauri 2003; Kemp and Ghauri 1998; Morgan and Hunt 1994). On the one hand, establishment of trust and proximity feeling in interpersonal relationships can improve general relationship quality (Wong and Sohal 2002). On the other hand, long-term relationships encourage customer honesty, which motivates both sides to recognize each other better and allows service provider better understand and satisfy client demands, what in turn develops stronger client trust (Czepiel 1990).

The goal of communication is formation of mutual understanding in early phases of relationships, development of client loyalty and encouragement of desired client decisions (Ndubisi and Chan 2005). Customers should feel that company demonstrates genuine interest in the them as well as in their demands, requirements, value systems and in persuasive way introduce products, services or any other elements of general offer.

Communication is the basic component of business relationship initiation and development, besides it is a variable that is frequently measured in order to estimate relationship development (Andersen 2001).

### **2.3 Service quality**

Parasuraman *et al.* (1988) cited by Yuen and Chan (2010, P. 222) agree that the gap between customer expectations and perceived quality are determinants of service quality, they define service quality as ‘ the degree of discrepancy between customer normative expectations for the service and their perceptions of the service performance’.

Fen & Lian, (2005, p.59-60) found that both service quality and customer satisfaction have a positive effect on customer’s re-patronage intentions showing that both service quality and customer satisfaction have a crucial role to play in the success and survival of any business in the competitive market.

Kong and Muthusamy (2010, P.145) states ‘Service quality focuses on satisfying customers needs in the moments of truth during service encounters where the customer form perceptions of the service delivered, received’.

*Service* is different from physical products. ‘Compared with physical products, service is thought to be intangible, heterogeneous, produced and consumed simultaneously, unable to be kept in stock, etc’. A widely accepted definition of *service* is proposed by Grönroos in 1990 as: “A service is a process consisting of a series of more or less intangible activities that normally, but not necessarily always, take place in interactions between the customer and service employees and/or physical resources or goods and/or systems of the service provider, which provided as solutions to customer problems” (see Grönroos, 2000, p.46). This definition implied that service is a process where the interactions between customer and service provider most often exist. ‘Hence, in a service context, there are almost a relationship

between customer and service provider, such relationship can be used as a basis for marketing' (Grönroos, 2000). In order to retain loyal customer who will bring long-term profit to the firm, the key issue for the service provider is to make a relationship work by offering what the customer's needs and wants.

The quality of a service is subjectively perceived by customers during the interactions with a firm (Grönroos, 2000). Parasuraman *et al.* (1988) defined service quality as the consumer's judgment about a firm's overall excellence or superiority. What happens and perceived by customers in the interaction process will obviously have critical impacts on customers' evaluation of service quality (Grönroos, 2000).

According to Douglas & Connor, (2003, p.166), Parasuraman *et al.*, (1985, p.42), and Ladhari, (2009, p.172), the intangible elements of a service (inseparability, heterogeneity and perishability) are the critical determinants influencing service quality perceived by a consumer. This means that a service must be well defined by the provider in terms of its characteristics in order to understand how service quality is perceived by consumers. According to Johns, (1999, p.954), a service could mean an industry, a performance, an output, an offering or a process and it is defined differently in various service industries.

Service quality is an important area to academicians because of its relevancy to service companies and therefore many researchers have tried to develop various models to measure it, even though some claim it is hard to measure because of its intangibility which is hard to quantify (Eshghi *et al.*, 2008, p.121); (Douglas & Connor, 2003, p.171). This is why as services are intangible in nature, evaluating the customer's perception of quality can be done through the interaction with the personnel offering



services, (Magi & Julander, 1996, p.35). From their suggestion, interaction between consumer and service provider is very important when measuring service quality because through that interaction, the service provider could easily understand the consumer better and identify what he/she exactly wants.

Sureshchander et al, (2002, p.373) state that ‘The veritable gains of a quality revolution come only from customer delight, which again to a very great extent depends on the customer’s perceptions of overall service quality. This is why it is very imperative to understand how consumers perceive service quality and how these perceptions could affect their repurchase behaviour because through this way organisations can be able to identify whether or not gaps exist and do take corrective actions to improve upon their activities. In this way, organisations can implement appropriate quality systems which could result to customer satisfaction’.

Service quality is an important area for practitioners because according to (Douglas & Connor, 2003, p.167), (Saravanan & Rao, 2007, p.435) the need for survival and growth is in ever increasing competitive markets are critical factors in the search for providing superior service quality and achieving customer satisfaction. Researchers have proven that providing good service quality to customers retains them, attracts new ones, enhances corporate image, positive word-of-mouth recommendation and above all guarantees survival and profitability, Negi, (2009); Ladhari, (2009).

Various models have been developed to measure service quality following these approaches either attitude-based measures or disconfirmation models. According to (Shahin *et al.*, 2006, p.2), it is very important to measure service quality because it allows for

comparisons before and after changes, identifies quality related problems, and helps in developing clear standards for service delivery.

The SERVPERF model developed by Cronin & Taylor, (1992), uses the performance approach method which measures service quality based on customer's overall feeling towards service. This model is good to measure service quality but does not provide information on how customers will prefer service to be in order for service providers to make improvements.

Teas, (1993), developed the Evaluated Performance model which measures the gap between perceived performance and the ideal amount of a dimension of service quality, rather than the customer's expectation. This was to solve some of the criticism of some previous models Gronroos, (1984); Parasuraman et al., (1985, 1988).

### **2.3.1 The Gap Model**

The GAP model was developed by Parasuraman, A., Zeithaml, V. A., and Berry, L., (PZB, 1990). The researchers were of the opinion, those executives who are eager to achieve customer satisfaction through service quality must implement a continuous process; in order to monitor customers' perceptions of service quality, identify causes of service quality shortcomings and also to enable the executives to undertake appropriate action in order to improve the quality of service provided (Parasuraman *et al.*, 1990).

The researchers conducted exploratory research in order to develop this model, which consisted of a combination of in-depth interviews and focus groups from four nationally recognised companies, from the same four service sectors. The information gleaned from the research enabled the researchers to establish four possible key causes/gaps of service-quality

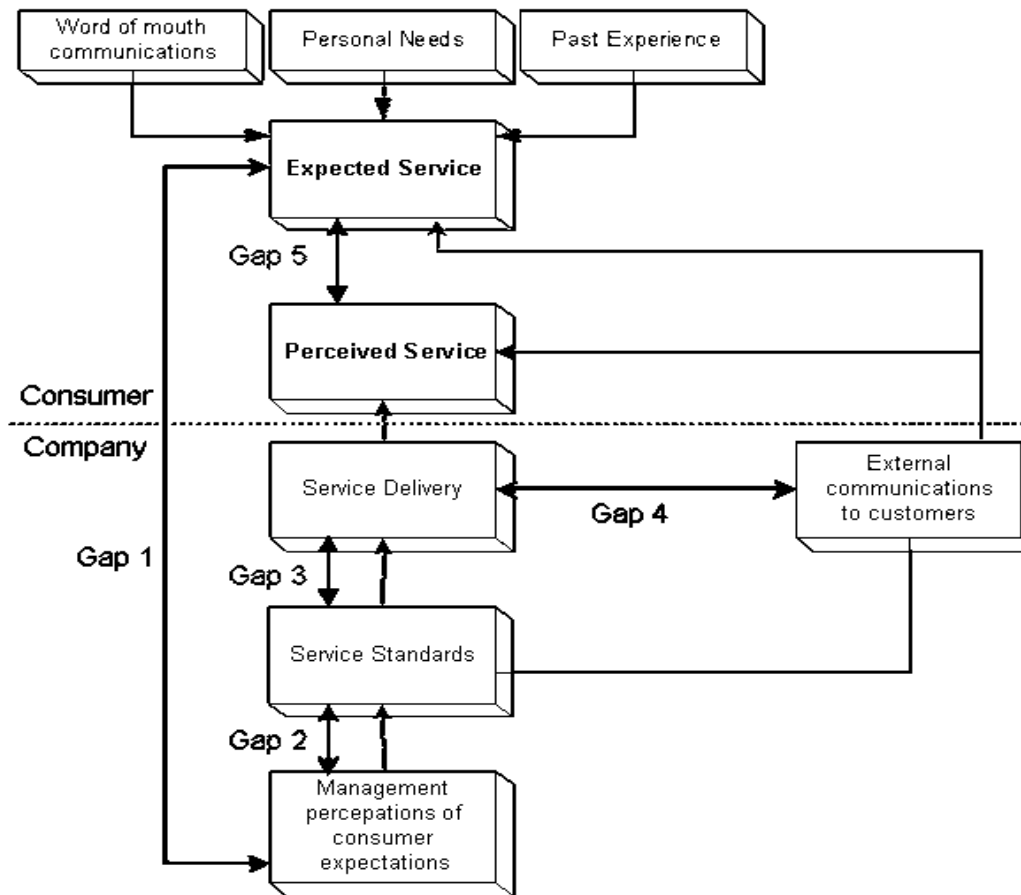
shortfalls; relating to the perceptions of service-quality, that executives may have and the tasks associated with service delivery to end customers (Parasuraman *et al.*, 1990).

The model consists of four major shortcomings, within the service providers' organisation (Gap one to four) See Exhibit 1. Gap five which represents the shortfalls in service quality expected and perceived by customers (Parasuraman *et al.*, 1990).

Parasuraman *et al.* (1990) uncover that the key contributing factors of the service expected by customers are as follows: word of mouth, personal needs, past experience and also external communications from the service provider.

The outline of the Gaps model is concerned with not knowing what your customers expects, the wrong service quality standards, the service performance Gap and when promises do not match delivery (Parasuraman *et al.*, 1990).

## GAP model of service quality



*Exhibit 1* Conceptual Model of Service Quality

Available from <http://www.degromoboy.com/cs/images/gap.gif>

This model denotes a ‘logical process which companies can employ to measure and improve quality of service’ (Parasuraman *et al.*, 1990).

### 2.3.2 SERVQUAL

Parasuraman *et al.*, (1985), developed a model of service quality after carrying out a study on four service settings: retail banking, credit card services, repair and maintenance of electrical appliances, and long-distance telephone services. The SERVQUAL model represents service quality as the discrepancy between a customer’s expectations of service

offering and the customer's perceptions of the service received Parasuraman et al., (1985).

This makes it an attitude measure. What this model strives to measure exactly is the consumer perception of the service quality which depends on the size of the gap between expected service and perceived service which in turn, depends on the gaps under the control of the service provider such as delivery of service, marketing, (Parasuraman et al., 1985).

This measurement of service quality is based on both on how consumer evaluates the service delivery process and the outcome of the service, (Parasuraman et al., 1985, p.42). A good service quality is considered as one which meets or exceeds consumer's expectation of the service (Parasuraman et al.,1985, p.46)

Relationship between satisfaction and service quality is the key to measure user satisfaction (Pitt *et al.*, 1995). A number of past studies to date, have been undertaken to identify quality dimensions and detailed aspects with customer satisfaction (Zeithaml *et al.*,2002, Young and Fang, 2004). One of the more widely used instruments for assessing service quality is SERVQUAL is a method used to define five dimensions of quality, Parasuraman *et al.*, (1990), states that 'SERVQUAL is a concise multiple-item scale with good reliability and validity that companies use to better understand the service expectations and perceptions of their customers'.

SERVQUAL was designed with the intention, which it would apply to a variety of services. Through its expectations/perceptions design, it includes testimonials for the five service-quality dimensions, which are: 1) Tangibles, 2) Reliability, 3) Responsiveness 4) Assurance and, 5) Empathy (Parasuraman *et al.*, 1990).

The initial development of SERVQUAL instrument has been adjusted and refined over time; in order to justify its relevance in service quality. The SERVQUAL instrument includes an

expectation section which consist of 22 statements and a perception section that consists of corresponding statements relevant to the company (Parasuraman *et al.*, 1990).

## **2.4 Customer care programme**

According to Cook (2008, P.207-208) ‘Training and development in customer service is a key method of bringing about change. The best training and development is that which is based on customer feedback. Customer service training benefits from constant renewal and refreshment.’

Most managers believe that good training programs are crucial to a company success (Kelly, 1993).

‘Internal Marketing is the accumulation and application of functions and tools aimed at the formation and maintenance of a consistent, efficient, effective and customer orientated workforce. These objectives are achieved through the communication with and attraction, retention, motivation, education and management of suitable employees’ (Mahnert and Torres, 2007). Zeithaml *et al.*, (2006) suggests, ‘A complex combination of strategies needed to ensure that service employees are willing and able to deliver quality service and that they stay motivated to perform in customer-oriented, service-minded ways’.

These statements are also supported by Pegler (2004) who explains to retain loyal customers and gain new customers many changes are required such as fundamental restructuring, a significant investment in employee training. ‘Improving customer service may mean new hires and major retraining across all customer facing areas. Effective change programs must

be driven top-down'. These changes need to be driven from top down to have a successful training in place and achieve excellent customer service which helps to retain customers.

According to Cook and Mc Caulay (2008) there are eight identifiable characteristics which make the difference to customer service training with frontline staff. These characteristics are:

1. Start at the beginning: Listen to customers
2. Be an example
3. Set and maintain standards
4. Embed training and development integrate customer service
5. Focus on the customer inside and out
6. Improving processes
7. Empower employees
8. Recognising and reinforcing

Twomey (2012, P.219) suggested that the only way to have a successful customer care programme in an organisation is to carry out careful research. 'You need to know all you can about the company, its origins, its products and goals. Discover what its greatest successes and failures have been and how they have shaped the way the company is today'. Twomey (2012) also suggested that a manager should also talk to staff and customers to apply a successful customer care program.

Cook (2011) agrees that to implement a successful customer care program that the company needs to listen to customers to understand the areas that are in most need of improvement which help to set the correct objective to be achieved and also set the right environment for the program to be successful. Cook (2011) also states 'In setting training and development

objectives and deciding on the methods to be adopted, it must be remembered that training and development will be accepted when the trainee is motivated to learn and in addition, when management wants the learning to take place. Therefore it is important to create the right environment for learning to take place- training should be enjoyable and not be seen as a chore'. This statement also expresses to managers that staff needs to be motivated to learning for your company to see a return on investment.

Bratton and Gold (2007) also suggest to identify the areas where training is needed first is to listen to customers. According to Scullion and Linehan (2005) training should focus on individual deficiencies and could be a tool to close the gap between customers 'expectations and customers' perception of a service, i.e. The Customer Gap. It agrees that even though individual deficiencies should be considered in the learning process, there could and should be some generalisations or standardisations in the training scheme. Such generalisation should include standard procedures for how to act and react in any situation occurring in the everyday chores of frontline employees.

Training can be deemed very important after research was conducted by British Airways indicated that experiences passengers have with staff play a major part in generating goodwill. The survey showed that human relations with passengers are twice as important as operational factors. It also demonstrated that bad experience can destroy goodwill more than positives add to it. Although the main service arena which passengers experience is in flight, cabin crew, ground staff and these staff members can also upset goodwill by unhelpful behaviour. Cook (2011) states the relationship an organization creates with it existing customers determines the goodwill customers feel towards the company and hence the quality



of its reputation. Hence this proves that customer service training in a company is essential for the organisation to help improve pleasant experience in their company for their customers.

Satisfaction with training programmes (whether internally or externally delivered) is an important topic for organisations. Yet often standards for required level of quality are not adequately defined, other than superficial rating scales, which are questionable in terms of validity and reliability (Mulder, 2001).

However Twomey (2012) highlights the importance of the usefulness of customer care programmes for a company only if they are implemented correctly.

Pollitt (2007) has helped illustrate the effectiveness of training programs through research conducted for Mc Donalds it was found that the training has helped to raise the percentage of customers agreeing that Mc Donalds service is friendly , courteous, fast and efficient. It also reveals that the programme has reduced turnover among employees by more than 8% in a year.

Customer service training has the merits demonstrated in terms of increased revenue and positive customer feedback (Pollitt, 2011). Rust *et al.* (2002) echo that firms that primarily focus on market investment (i.e. Customer service) will do better than firms that primarily focus on cost reduction.

Many authors and researchers agree that training should aim to increase skills and knowledge. This in turn, according to Berry and Parasuraman (1992), increases the confidence of a worker who is being trained. A confident worker is more able to be “innovate for customers”, meaning being creative in finding solutions to customer demands and requests. That is the reason why we argue that confidence is crucial to achieve employee empowerment, and hence, training will increase employee empowerment.

Cook and Mc Caulay (2008, PP. 41) states ‘Customer service training should not be restricted purely to frontline employees. To create a truly customer focused organisation everyone within it should take part in customer service training’.

According to Cook and Mc Caulay (2008) ‘No matter how much organisations invest in frontline training in customer service, they will not see long term improvement unless every aspects of the customer contact with them is focused on their needs’ and “the customer service needs to be addressed from the perceptions of the customer, not the service provider”.

Twomey (2012) also highlights with customer service training that it important to invest these programmes into a company but it highlights that it is important to remember to implement these programmes properly into the company and do not “leave them unused at the back of a shelf”. This occurs for a number of reasons such as managers being lazy, failure to commit to the programme like many programmes that managers invest in for the company are too complicated. Twomey (2012) suggests that managers should design customer service programmes that suit their company which is “simple, impartial and open”.

#### **2.4.1 Attitude of small firms towards training programs**

Johnson (2002) express that small firms are becoming rationally in rejecting a strong focus on training activities. For instance, there is a well established chronic fear of staff mobility resulting in efforts to develop staff to be seen as a largely wasted investment (Patton and Marlow, 2002). Consequently, small firms tend to be reluctant in investing time, finance and other resources in training (Lashley and Rowson, 2003; Beeton and Graetz, 2001).

Morrisson and Bergin-Seers (2002) investigated growth oriented small firms and generally found a negative attitude toward formalised training and providers. One reason for such a finding is advocated by Gray (2002) who suggested that micro-firms (less than 10 employees) are more interested in survival rather than growth. He notes the paradox where the perceived flexibility of small firms is seen as strength to adapt to changing conditions, yet these firms also suffer from ingrained habits of the owner/manager that can smother growth. Thus, personal ambitions or orientation toward profit goals, growth and customer service are more likely to lead to a variation in interest in training, in general, and customer service training in particular.

Butcher and Sparks (2009) have conducted similar research to this study which will help the understanding of small firm's attitudes and activities in improvement of customer service training. 'Training is largely treated as an aggregated term that has until now escaped being examined at a more micro level. It has helped Butcher and Sparks (2009) research to explore various forms of customer service training, such mystery shopping, quality reviews and benchmarking best practice. As previous researchers have not investigated specific forms of customer service training in this context it sought information from industry executives to assist with the formulation of outcome variables'.

The conclusion from that research was 'Mystery shopping involves an 'outsider' to visit the accommodation as a guest and report on how they perceived the level of service on key attributes. The quality review typically involves a list of attributes being rated by the owner/manager as an insider. The third improvement activity, benchmarking best practice, involves selecting an external point of reference with high standards and making comparisons between the firm and the external point of reference. Each form of customer service improvement activity involves varying levels of 'control' by the owner/manager. For

instance, the owner/manager has no control over how a mystery shopper rates the performance of the firm but has complete control in a self-report of quality attributes' (Butcher and Sparks, 2009). These findings help gauge the way for further research in the area that small firms need to adapt to customer service training improvements for their companies to survive.

However these researchers have different opinions towards the attitude of small firms adopting training in their organisation, Thomson and Gray (1999) have linked growth oriented small firms to a positive attitude toward training activity and, in particular, strong awareness of the importance of management development. In small to medium size firms with between 20 and 200 employees, Vinten (2000) found those firms undertaking higher levels of training also had a positive attitude that training leads to success; tended to integrate training as part of a company strategy; adopted training that is very practical rather than theoretical; and, acknowledged the importance of a strategic role for training. He argues that where training is made more relevant to small firms needs and delivered onsite in a flexible manner there will be greater receptivity.

## Chapter Three

### Methodology

#### 3.1 Research Philosophy

The researcher has adopted an interpretive research philosophy for the study. Creswell (2003) states that this philosophy holds that individuals seek an understanding of the world in which they live and work so by use of qualitative research methods, the researcher will seek to discover the reality of customer service within small retailers in Donegal.

Mason (2009) states interpretive research approach is concerned with an understanding of the social world people have produced and reproduced through their continuing activities. An interpretive approach therefore not only sees people as a primary data source, but seeks their perceptions or what Blakie (2000) states the 'Insider View', rather than imposing an 'outsider view' (Blakie, 2000 cited by Mason ,2009). This helps the researcher discover both the owner/manager and customers perception of the delivery of customer service in the participating outlets in County Donegal.

Malhotra (2009) explains that qualitative research is exploratory research based on small samples intended to provide insight and understanding of the problem and its underlying factors. Creswell (2003) echoes that statement and explains 'qualitative research to provide an explanation for behaviour and attitudes, and it may be complete with variables, constructs and hypotheses'.

### **3.2 Research design**

An exploratory research design was adopted for this piece of research, Malhotra (2009) explains exploratory research as ‘One type of research design that has as its primary objective the provision of insights into and comprehension of the problem situation confronting the researcher’. The data collection methods selected for this research was semi structured interviews and focus groups, these two methods allows the researcher to get a better understanding of the delivery of customer service in Donegal. Other data collection methods were considered, but deemed not appropriate to answer the research objectives effectively.

### **3.3 Data Collection Methods**

This research has been conducted in two sections. With the researcher carrying out seven semi structured interviews first with owner/managers of small retail outlets in Donegal. Wengraf (2004) defines semi structured interviews are ‘designed to have a number of interview questions prepared in advance but such prepared questions are designed to be sufficiently open that the subsequent questions of the interviewer cannot be planned in advance but must be improvised in careful and theorized’. These interviews were complete to discover the perception that the owner/managers has regarding customer service delivery. A theme sheet is available in appendix two which will guide the researcher throughout the interviews. These took place at each retailer’s premises across Donegal. All owner/managers were able to conduct interviews face to face, this allowed the owner/manager to share their own opinions or beliefs to gain a better insight into the research, which was advantage for the researcher as this allowed the researcher to build a relationship with interviewee and trust.

The second data collection method the researcher has adopted for this research is to construct two focus groups with eight respondents per group. Robson (2011) states ‘A focus group (sometimes referred to as a focus group interview- which emphasizes the fact that this is a particular type of interview) is a group interview on specific topic, which the focus comes from. It is an open ended group discussion guided by the researcher, typically extending over at least an hour, possibly two or more’. The focus groups were conducted to discover a perception of customer service in Donegal and reality of customer service delivery from a customers perspective. The focus groups took place in a meeting room at An Grianán Theatre which is a central location for all respondents and had no connection to the owner/manager who was previously interviewed. This venue was in no way bias in selection of the venue. This data collection method has been chosen as it has deemed more appropriate than other methods such as observation to collect sufficient opinions and beliefs about the reality of customer service in Donegal. Focus groups help respondents join in debates and discuss past experience which helps the researcher draw finding from interactions of the respondents. Robson (2011) states focus groups have advantage compared to other methods as they generating substantial amounts of data and they do not discriminate against people who cannot read or write on their own or participants who interviewed on their own cannot expand their knowledge with a researcher but in group setting find it easier to express opinion.

Semi structured interviews and focus groups are appropriate in this type of research as the researcher wants to discover respondent’s perceptions and beliefs to develop themes and patterns about customer service in small retailers in Donegal. These data collection methods helps respondents build rapport between themselves and the researcher which helps build empathy for respondents to shared perceptions and beliefs.

### 3.4 Measurement Techniques

Semi structured interviews discover perceptions of delivery of customer service in retail outlets by owner/managers of them outlets. These interviews were aided with a theme sheet which helps facilitate discussion with owner/managers and allowed them to explain in detail what their thoughts and opinions were, how their outlets were performing in customer service and how they assist their staff to portray good customer service. This technique helped in the gathering of data that was needed to assist the research being conducted. The researcher also received valuable data that was not predicted at the outset of the research being conducted. The theme sheet was divided into different variables which corresponded directly with sub objectives.

A pilot test for the interview was conducted on 2<sup>nd</sup> April 2012 at 3.00pm with Manager Valerie Moore of Brian Mc Cormick sports and leisure outlet premises in Letterkenny. This pilot test was conducted to identify any faults in the theme sheet such as inappropriate questions, sequence of questions or wording. A number of problems arose throughout the pilot test such as understanding questions and some technical wording.

The interview began informally as the researcher explains the type of research being carried out and the purpose of the research. The researcher started the interview with a broad discussion of customer service overall in Donegal and then started to introduce the structured questions. This helped to gather enhanced data for the research. After the researcher had conducted a number of interviews she learned to probe the interviewee, this allowed a more in-depth analysis of the answers being given, a lot more insight was then gained from the



interviews. The interviews were conducted from April until June 2012 allowing the researcher adequate time to prepare.

Each interview was recorded with a Dictaphone, with granted permission of each respondent, this aided the researchers thinking process and facilitated concentrations on what was being said and helped the researcher to lead deep into the owner/managers responses (Arksey and Knight, 1999). The researcher did take notes throughout the interview as a precaution ensuring all information is recorded.

The second section of research that took place was the two focus groups with customers who have relationships or who are familiar with outlets prior to the interview. The purpose of the focus group was to uncover the reality of customer service delivery in small retail outlets in Donegal. The focus group was aided with a theme sheet which used prompts to help aid a detailed discussion in the focus groups. The theme sheet was divided in topics which help correspond to research objectives, the questions were also formed by data obtained from semi structured interviews.

A pilot test was conducted for the focus group on the 3<sup>rd</sup> of June to identify any problems with the theme sheet such as understanding the questions asked, time of the focus groups or flow of discussion from the group. A number of issues did occur such as timing and questions being bias on the researcher behalf which was amended before the primary research was conducted.

The focus groups took place on 20<sup>th</sup> of July at 2pm and the duration of each group was 1 hour. The focus group began informally with the researcher introducing the piece of research and what was going to happen during the focus group. Each focus group went to plan as there was adequate discussion and opinion shared. The research was obtained with Dictaphone and the

researcher took notes. Each respondent was asked permission before the recording of the focus group. Robson (2011) states focus groups are a highly efficient technique for qualitative data because as respondents are in a group setting the group dynamics help in focusing on the most important topics and it is fairly easy to assess the extent to which there is consistent and shared view.

### **3.5 Sampling Techniques**

The first section of research conducted was semi structured interviews, the population was defined for sample size as it was used before by Kiely and Armistead (2004) who have conducted similar researcher which proves that seven owner/managers are viable number to gain insight into perception of the delivery of customer service in their companies. The researcher has also chosen to adopt non probability and judgement sampling to the research. The sampling method used by the researcher is non probability sampling. Malhotra (2009, P. 334) states non probability sampling is ‘Sampling techniques that does not use chance selection procedures. Rather they rely on the personal judgement of the researcher’. While non probability sampling is perceived as being subject to bias because it may not be representative, it is commonly used in exploratory research and in this case the research believes those selected respondents are representative of the target sample and have provided adequate information to answer the research objectives.

The sampling technique which the researcher applied was judgement sampling. Judgement sampling is ‘A form of convenience sampling in which the population elements are purposively selected based on the judgement of the researcher’ (Malhotra, 2009).

The target population which the researcher adopted was seven owner/managers of small retail outlets in Donegal. A list of ten small retail outlets was draw up by the judgement of the researcher. The researcher visited all ten retailers and explains the research purpose to the retailers and asks if they would like to take part in the research. Then the researcher from her better judgement selected seven retailers, who she believes would share adequate information.

Section two of the research saw two focus groups taking place with the target population being customers who had experienced the delivery of customer service in the previous outlets interviewed in the research.

The sample size adopted for this research is eight customers per focus group. The researcher is going to proceed with two focus groups with eight respondents per group which will be a total of sixteen respondents. This sample size was selected by the researcher as it has been conducted in previous research and feels this is the sufficient amount of responds to conduct a focus group. Wong and Sohoul (2003) have previously carried out similar research which conducted focus groups with eight customers per group and also used the outcomes from interviews to aid theme sheet and prompts for the focus groups.

Again the researcher will be using non probability method and judgement sampling technique. The researcher will also have no sample frame so she will be choosing the customers from her better judgement. The researcher did approach a number of customers that were in the retail outlets who have been previously interviewed in the research, ask customers to participate in the focus group by having permission from owner/manager. The researcher was surprised when the respondents agreed to participate in the research, this was a great advantage for the research. This was great advantage as the research was not bias as

researcher did not know any of the respondent and the researcher believed she would gain more in-depth information for this reason.

### **3.6 Presentation of Findings**

The findings from the research conducted in section one and two have been documented, summarised and analysed in terms of the themes explored during both interviews and focus groups. Areas highlighted in the theme sheet provided new themes to be uncovered during the analysis as different variables of data were founded. Mason (2009) suggests that ‘categorical indexing’ helps researchers categorise, code or retrieve data that could simply take the form of serial of subheadings at relevant points in text based data, which gives a descriptive sense of what each section of text is about, and may be useful as a way of directing the reader’s eye through an individual text. This helps the presentation of the findings. The findings are presented in narrative structure for both pieces of data (Kvale, 1996). An example of this style can be seen by Trim and Lee (2004).

## **Chapter Four**

### **Findings & Analysis**

#### **4.1 Introduction**

The findings and analysis of the research are highlighted in the following chapter and are presented based on themes explored during the seven semi structured interviews and two focus groups conducted, these themes correspond with the research objectives that were presented at the start of the research.

#### **4.2 Semi Structured Interviews**

##### **4.2.1 Importance of customer service delivery to small retail outlets in Donegal**

Twomey (2012, p. 2) defined customer service ‘as the provision or service of a sufficient quality and in sufficient manner that reaches or exceeds the customer expectations’. This definition is important for the owner/manager to have a reminder of what customer service delivery really is. From the seven owner/managers interviewed in this research all agreed that customer service was important to them. When questioned further into why it was important five out of the seven owner/managers could not explain why it was important to their company. The researcher feels that there is gap in small retailers in Donegal that they don’t really understand why customer service is important for their company. They do understand that it is important to portray an element of it in their service offerings.

From this gap the researcher feels that small retailers in Donegal should be educated well on customer service as it will help to increase customers and also revenue. The researcher believes that the Chamber of Commerce should investigate into this recommendation as they further expand the services being offered in Donegal.

The one respondent who did explain why customer service was important to their company stated that ‘Customer service is very important to this company as it helps build a good customer relationship and it helps to increase our sales annually with repeat customers’. The researcher did learn at the end of this interview that this particular respondent had retail and customer training experience. The respondent also added that this helped her improve and add to the service she offers. It also helps her guide her staff in a more formal structure and portrays a better and confident service to her customers.

#### **4.2.2 Attitudes towards training within small retail outlets**

From past research authors have a mixed view on what small retailers attitude is to training, from the following authors both have a different opinion with one author stating that small retailers believe training is a positive investment for a company and the other author expressing that small retailers believe it is not a sufficient investment for a small company.

Johnson (2002) expresses that small firms are becoming rationally in rejecting a strong focus on training activities. For instance, there is a well established chronic fear of staff mobility resulting in efforts to develop staff to be seen as a largely wasted of investment (Patton and Marlow, 2002).

However Thomson and Gray (1999) are arguing a link in the growth oriented small firms to a positive attitude toward training activity and, in particular, strong awareness of the importance of management development. Both these arguments are different but from the respondents who were interviewed a number of them do agree that training is a positive experience for your company. However a smaller number agree that training is waste of investment for their company as they have only a small workforce. The researcher does believe that a smaller number of respondents that do have a negative attitude towards training

are not looking at the bigger marketplace where small firms do grow from adopting training and remain very competitive in the marketplace.

From the respondents interview only a small number of them impose formal training into the workplace but only when a new employee starts employment. This training is never revisited or measured by the owner/manager. The training is not being adequately carried out by the companies that are implementing it as it is only at the start of employment with new employees. With training in these companies they do not have any set guidelines or model to follow when the training is being carried out.

A number of other respondents state that they do not have any formal training giving to employees at the start of employment or during employment. Respondents did mention that they do brief employees very informally in the “Do’s” and “Don’ts” at the start of employment.

One respondent did mention that he prefers his employees to develop their own customer service skills as every staff member’s personality is different. He also expressed that he does not have all the correct answers for dealing with customers, so this is why he allows his staff to develop their own techniques. This respondent is happy if his employees greet every customer and make sure that they are made feel valued, Barlow and Stewart (2006, p. 19) research agrees with this respondents philosophy. The respondent did state that he would think of adopting training for his company in the future to help keep the company competitive.

From all respondents interviewed they do believe training is very important in a company but they do believe it is not as important in their companies as they only have a small workforce. This attitude is very negative as it does not allow the company to grow or improve the type of

service which is being offered to customers. The respondent's main attitude is that they would rather just survive in the marketplace than try any other options which would help them to grow. These respondents do not believe that they need to implement training or the measurement of training to everyday activities in the company as they only have a small workforce. Gray (2002) supports these findings as he states that micro-firms (less than 10 employees) are more interested in survival rather than growth. The researcher believes that this is the wrong type of attitude for a company to have, she believes that regardless of whether a company has one or sixty employees they should try to portray a better service offering to the customer at all times and use all resources available to them to achieve this goal.

#### **4.2.3 Perceptions of the delivery of customer service in small retail outlets**

From the entire respondents interviewed, they all agree that they delivery excellent customer service. They all stated 'We hope we provided an excellent service, we feel that we do provide an excellent service as we have large numbers of repeat customers every week which leads us to believe that we do provide a good service'.

All respondents are of the opinion that they provide that little bit extra to customers compared to bigger retailers. As they believe that they are able to make the service more personalised for the customer compared to larger retailers when this service would not be as widely available to customers. As one respondent mentioned if a customer was buying a piece of clothing in her outlet and it didn't fit properly she would have arrangements made for it to have alterations made to the items or if the item needs steamed the respondent would provide this service. The respondent echoes that this service would not be available in the bigger



retailers, this respondent believes this makes her service unique compared to the larger retailers. Kong and Muthusamy (2010) research is similar to this respondent as both are trying to satisfy the customers moment of truth by providing a unique service which are only available in limited outlets which makes this service very unique and cause the customers to form a excellent perception of the outlet and service it received.

All respondents did mention that they believe a good customer service is being provided but it would not be available only for the help of their workforce. They believe that their employee is credit to the company and are all well educated to approach customers and help customers with any enquires or problems at all. Overall the respondents believe that there is great customer service provided in Donegal by small retailer and by themselves as well.

### **4.3 Focus Groups**

At the start of each focus group customers were asked to explain what they believe customer service was, this was to allow the researcher to get an understanding that all respondents understood what customer service is before proceeding with the focus group.

All respondents explain customer service to be a friendly efficient service where employees are quick to deal with customer needs and wants.

#### **4.3.1 Important attribute in the delivery of customer service**

All customers have a perceived level of what attribute is important to them when receiving customer service. These attributes can be as simple as a friendly hello or smile on arrival to the outlet by a staff member. These attributes that customers feel are important to the delivery of the customer service, helps them believe that they are a valued customer to that company.

Barlow and Stewart (2006) explains these attributes are important to portray to the customer

as it helps to identify to the customer that they are important to business and helps to build relationships with the customer which helps to provide excellent service delivery, “We are big enough to meet your immediate business needs while we are small enough to know you”...’.

From all respondents interviewed the main attribute which they believed was important was the friendliness of a staff member which means that they greet them with a smile or a friendly hello and when a customer asks for help with an enquiry that a staff member is approachable and would serves them without making them feel this an inconvenience for the member of staff.

One respondent expressed important attributes to them is that if a customer has a complaint that it is deal with quickly and the member of staff that is treating the complaint is listening to the customer and not made feel that your compliant an inconvenience for their outlet. The company should express that they listen to the customer, it will help to grow customer loyalty, Keh and Teo (2001) research supports this comment.

From past research customer service is becoming a phenomenon with the customer now as it helps the customer to decide if they will become a loyal customer to certain outlets as customers are always rating the standard of service they are receiving in outlets. From research by Guinea (2006) discover that customer are constantly grading customer service delivery at each transaction. From that research these six attributes are deem important to customers which co-sign with this research finding from respondents.

- Friendliness – the most basic and associated with courtesy and politeness.
- Empathy – the customer needs to know that the service provider appreciates their wants and circumstances.

- Fairness – the customer wants to feel they receive adequate attention and reasonable answers.
- Control – the customer wants to feel his/her wants and input has influence on the outcome.
- Information – customers want to know about products and services but in a pertinent and time-sensitive manner.

Respondents were also asked why they believe these attributes were important to the delivery of customer service and the common theme which was found to be was that customers felt that the attributes were important because it helps to determine repeat custom and made the customer feel valued which in turn creates a loyal customer for the outlet.

#### **4.3.2 Standard of service quality**

The standard of service quality is very important to a customer because customers always want to receive excellent quality at time of service. The quality of a service is subjectively perceived by customers during the interactions with a firm (Grönroos, 2000). Parasuraman *et al.* (1988) defined service quality as the consumer's judgment about a firm's overall excellence or superiority. What happens and perceived by customers in the interaction process will obviously have critical impacts on customers' evaluation of service quality (Grönroos, 2000).

From a research view it is hard to measure the exact standard of service quality as it determines from a customer perception. A customer perception helps to determine some sort of standards which helps companies to improve the standard or give feedback to employees to help remain motivated to keep providing an excellent service. Zeithaml *et al.*, (2006) agree as he sates, 'A complex combination of strategies needed to ensure that service employees

are willing and able to deliver quality service and that they stay motivated to perform in customer-oriented, service-minded ways'

From respondents who participated in the focus groups they have mixed reviews on the standard of service being delivered by the companies previously interviewed. Respondents believe four out of the seven companies interviewed provided an excellent service. These companies are more willing to help a customer and have a very friendly welcome on arrival to the outlet. If a customer has an enquiry the retailer is willing to help without any problem or hesitation and give advice to the customer if needed.

When asked about the standard of quality in outlets previously interviewed one respondent explained the experience which she had in one of the outlets. She had to interrupt two members of staff having general conversation to help with her enquiry and the respondent explained she was made to feel by the staff members as an inconvenience for them to help her. From the standard of service she received this day she never returned to that outlet again. The researcher feels this one situation is an indication to companies that they need to start listening to the customers and improving the standard of service being delivered in their outlets by listening to customer and not internally in the company.

#### **4.3.3 Is training important to small retailers**

The main theme developed in the focus groups was that training is essential for small retailers to succeed in customer service delivery. The respondents believe that training is an important element for these retailers to remain competitive in the marketplace over other small and large retailers.

During the focus groups respondents commented on companies who were previously interviewed, their main opinion was that these companies did not use any type of training at all. The respondents believe it was important for these companies to use training to enhance the performance of their employees but it will also enhance the reputation of the company if employees know how to properly interact with customers.

During the focus groups respondents emphasis how important training is to these small retailers and how important it is to implement training into the company. When companies implement training they need to constantly manage and measure the training process. One respondent stated that training is so important to small retailers to help them provide an excellent service. Training needs to be measured to understand how customers see it and therefore improve it where necessary, this should be carried out immediately before customers are lost. Cook (2011) expressed that to implement a successful customer care program that the company needs to listen to the customer to understand the areas that are most in need of improvement which will help to set the correct objective to be achieved and also set the right environment for the program to be successful.

#### **4.3.4 Perception of the delivery of customer service within small retail outlets in Donegal**

From all respondents who participated in the focus groups they believe that generally the delivery of customer service is on an acceptable level for these small retailers. Respondents did state that each retailer should try to improve their standard in some way because there is so many larger retailer in Donegal now and these small retailers could be forgotten about in the crowd if they don't try to improve the service in some way.

One respondent out of sixteen respondents interviewed did have an overall problem with customer service in Donegal. The respondents explained how Donegal measured in comparison to other counties in Ireland and countries worldwide, it is very poor in her opinion. The respondent believes that staff in general are unfriendly, unwelcoming and unhelpful. Donegal is stereotyped as a friendly place but when you have visited other cities it becomes apparent that this is not so.

When this respondent expressed her opinion other respondents agreed with her statement and claim that they did believe that customer service in Donegal within small outlets can be at times generally unfriendly, unwelcoming and unhelpful. When further questioned the respondents did express that small retailers need to apply more training to their company practice even if the company only employ two members of staff. Respondents believe it is important to portray the right image and correct standard of service when dealing with customers.

Respondents made suggestions for retailers to help motivate staff to provide excellent service such as displaying a list of guidelines and rules in staff areas on customer service. The staff members can view these guidelines every day which help remind them that the company wants them to portray excellent standards of service everyday to customers. This will help improve the standard of service in companies.

The respondent also commented on customer service since the economic boom that they believe retailers have slightly tried to increase their service offerings, but respondents stated that they only believe they try to increase the service offering because the marketplace has become so competitive that all retailers are fighting for the same customers. The respondents still feel that retailers can do more to provide a better customer service delivery to consumers.

## Chapter 5

### Conclusion and Recommendations

#### 5.1 Conclusions

In conclusion this research has proven that a gap exist between owner/manager perceptions of customer service delivery compared to the consumer perception within small retailers in Donegal. This gap has discovered that owner/managers perceived the customer service standards to be relativity high compared to customers perception of the standards. The customers perceive the standard of customer service is at acceptable level but do believe that owner/managers can improve the standard of service by adopting customer service training into the company. This gap was discovering with the help of the third research objective which was to uncover a gap.

This research has indicated the importance of attribute of customers when experiencing customer service. The consumers who were interviewed in the focus group commented how important it was for employees to portray attributes such as friendliness, approachable and willingness to assist a customer with any enquires. These consumers all agreed that they would have a better shopping experience if staff were approachable and friendly on their visit to outlets compare to when staff portray attributes such as being unfriendly and rude to customers. The behaviour and actions of one employee within the organisation may reflect negatively on the organisation and portray a negative attitude towards the company by the customer while in reality the organisation may be completely different. It important for owner/managers to guide staff to portray the correct attributes when dealing with customers. All respondents agree that these attribute were very important to the standard of customer

service being delivery to customers. The respondent did comment that a good standard of customer service determine if they will become a loyal customer to the company.

The research did discover many different issues with customer service within small retailers in Donegal. An area which was identified throughout the research was that owner/managers of small retailers in Donegal do not adopt customer service training to their company and believe it not essential for their company. The researcher does not agree with this attitude does believe that owner/managers should implement training into the company to enhance customer service standard. The researcher has developed a recommend framework for implement customer service training into small company which is aid with guidelines needed to implement a successful training program. The literature also indicated that customer training will enhance the company by implementing such training such author indicated this Twomey (2012) explains with customer service training that it important to invest these programmes into a company but highlights the importance to remember to implement these programmes properly into a company. With the help of semi structured interviews, focus group and a number of different articles the research objectives were answered. This research has been a successful piece of research as it helped identified number of different areas where future research can be investigated.

## **5.2 Recommendations**

From this piece of research the researcher has a number of evaluations which she would like to recommend to owner/managers of small retail outlets to help close the gap between of owner/managers perceptions of customer service compare to the customer perceptions.



The researchers believe that in the interest of owner/managers of small retail outlet in Donegal, they should adopt training to their business practices as it would help enhance the business and also help enhance relationships with their customers. The researcher believe this is essential for small retailers in Donegal as so many companies are getting lost in the crowd in this larger competitive marketplace that they traded in today, and are being force to shut down. The researcher believes if these small retailers get their customer service on the right track then the rest of the business practices will follow suit.

The researcher has designed a recommended framework to help these small retailers get their customer service on track. The researcher believes this framework will enhance owner/managers customer service standards in their outlets by applying customer training throughout the whole company and reviewing the customer service annually in the company. The framework goes through a number of steps to help the owner/managers design a customer service training program which will suit their company. The important factors for the owner/managers to remember when implement a training program into the organisation that all employees have to be a part of the program for it to work effectively in the company and also Cook and Mc Caulay (2008) states this in their past research.

The researcher recommended that owner/managers should ask customers for their opinions regularly about the standard of customer service in their outlet which helps build relationships between owner/managers and the customers. When asking customers for their opinion they should also asks customers if they would have any suggestions or recommendations for improving the service. When owner/managers involves customers this makes customer feel valued and helps to increase loyalty amongst customers to that company.

Another important recommendation that researcher believes is important for small retailers to adopt when trying to improve customer service is that these companies should measure the performance of the customer service monthly or weekly as they would do with sales figures. When a company measure the performance of customer service standards this will help keep employees motivated at time to succeed in portraying an excellence service for the company. The researcher suggested that the company should get participate from outside companies or expert company in customer service to measure the standard of customer service being delivery within the company.

### **5.3 Research reflections**

Initially the research presented challenges for the researcher to gain access to update date literature which would help the research. The researcher found that literature that was discover in eighties and earlier ninety was more academic and fitting with this research than literature found in more recent years. The research did present such challenges as trying to achieve correct sample size for the focus groups as some customers that were approached by researcher refuse. The researcher found this very challenging but did achieve the desired sample size at the end.

The researcher has identified a number of areas for further research, these include: measurement of customer service delivery in small retail outlets, the attitude of training by small retailers and the researcher would like to investigate deeper into consumer perceptions of customer service in retail outlets which she believe it will help owner/managers understand the customer more when providing them a service.

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## **Appendix One**

### **List of Companies Interviewed**

Brian Mc Cormick sports and leisure 2<sup>th</sup> April 2012 at 3:00pm

Exhibit Clothing Ltd 20<sup>th</sup> April 2012 at 3:00pm

County Seat 28<sup>th</sup> May 2012 at 10:30am

Toyko 28<sup>th</sup> May at 1:00pm

Zone 8<sup>th</sup> June 2012 at 2:15pm

R Mc Cullagh 12<sup>th</sup> June 2012 at 10:00am

Greene Shoes 12<sup>th</sup> June 2012 at 11:15am

## Appendix Two

### Theme Sheet for Owner/Managers

1. In terms of customer service delivery, how important do you feel customer service is to your company and why?
2. What attributes of customer service do you believe is important to your company and do you believe any attributes are more important than the other attributes?
  - After sales, greeting, follow-up calls, listen to and learn from disgruntled customers, response time etc.
3. What is your opinion on customer service in general considering the current economic climate? Why?
4. When training employees do you use a customer service model or framework to train employees in good customer service practice? If yes, what model and what benefit does your company is gain from this process?
5. What types of measurement are in place to see the benefits from customer service training?
6. Would you train employees in customer service annually/ every six months or on a once off basis? Why?
7. Is there a process within your company to deal with complaints by customers?  
Explain answer.
8. Do you feel it is essential to deal with ever customer complaint? Explain
9. What approach does front line staff of your company use when dealing with disgruntled customers? Explain.
10. What is your perception of how customer service delivery is being conducted within your company by front line staff? Why?

## Appendix Three

### Theme sheet for the focus groups

1. As consumers what do you determine customer service to be? And Why?
2. In the delivery of customer service what are the important attributes to you as consumers when in retail outlets?
  - Friendliness, helpfulness, approachable
3. Why do you believe these attributes are important to delivery of customer service? And Why?
  - Help repeat custom, helps determine loyalty with a company
4. As consumers do you believe customer service determines whether you become a loyalty customer to that outlet compared to other outlets?
5. As consumers did you ever experience great customer service which instantly made you become a repeat customer because the experience that you received was outstanding? And Why?
6. Have you as consumers ever had a bad experience with the delivery of customer service? Please elaborate
7. Can you please explain the attributes that a member of staff portrays when experience poor customer service delivery in your opinion?
  - Ignoring a customer, talking to other staff members when a customer is trying to get attention of a staff member, eating or chewing gum when serving a customer
8. From the selected retail outlets previously interviewed in this research can you as consumers explain a good/poor customer service experience you had in any of these outlets?

9. In the selected retail outlets how would you as consumers indicate the standard of quality in the customer service delivery in these retail outlets? And Why?
10. As consumers do you believe outlets which use comment cards or ask for customer feedback care about their customers? Do you believe these outlets take the feedback on board to improve the quality of service being delivered?
11. As consumers do you believe it important for companies to continually measured the customer service as they would measure their till reading at end of a day? And Why?
12. Do you believe it important for companies to annually training their staff on customer service as it helps to improve the standard of service being delivered? And Why?
13. From any of the companies interviewed do you believe that they have their staff well trained in customer service in your opinion? And Why?
14. As consumers do you believe these companies need to trained staff more regularly? Why?
15. Since the economic boom do you believe customer service in retail outlets have improved rapidly or decreased their service delivery to customer? And Why?
16. Overall what is your perception of customer service in retail outlets across county Donegal? And Why?

## Appendix Four

### A letter for small retailers

26/03/2012

Dear Sir/Madam

I am MSC in Marketing Practice student from Letterkenny Institute of Technology. I am taking this opportunity to ask if you would be interested in assisting me with my dissertation. I am currently carrying out research in customer service for my dissertation.

I would be interested in interviewing the owner/manager of your retail outlet to discover the perception of customer service being delivered in the outlet. If you would like to participate in my research I would also like to acquire a customer that would shop in your retail outlet to participate in a focus group and discover the perception that they have off the customer service being delivered in the outlet. In this request I the researcher would approach a customer in your retail store or if you did not mind advertised in your store for customers to participate in a focus group.

At the end of my research I would like to be able to suggested a recommended framework for customer service training or a best practice model for small retail outlets to use when providing customer service training

If your company would like to participate in a 30 minute interview, please reply to this letter via email to L00070014@student.lyit.ie or 0860631908 or the below address.

I would be very appreciated if you could participate in my research. I will be very gratefully if you could give me some time from your busy schedule. I do believe this research will



benefit retailers in Donegal to build customer loyalty and decrease the number of customer complaints.

You're faithfully,

Carrie – Ann Towey

Station House

Railway Road

Raphoe

Co. Donegal

[L00070014@student.lyit.ie](mailto:L00070014@student.lyit.ie)

086 0631908

## Appendix Five

### Consent Form

The reality of customer service within small retailers in Donegal.

**Investigator:** Carrie-Ann Towey

The aim of this proposed research is to investigate the perceived level of customer service being delivered in the outlets in the owner/ manager opinion compared with the actual delivery of customer service from the customer perception

Participants for interviews are selected by the researcher's judgement.

The identity of subjects will remain anonymous and all data gathered will be stored securely and accessed only by the principal researcher and supervisor.

**Declaration:** I \_\_\_\_\_, acknowledge that:

- I am over the age of 18
- Interviews may be recorded
- I have been informed about the research and have an opportunity to ask questions
- I consent to partake in this study
- My participation is voluntary
- I can withdraw at anytime
- I consent the publication of the results

## Appendix six

### Recommended Framework for small retailers to adopt customer service training to their company

