



The effect of customer service on customer retention (A case of selected service stations in kabulonga township in Lusaka)

Soter Mapalo^{1*}, Muchemwa Sinkala², Martin Nkolomba³

¹ Department of Business Administration, University of Zambia, Lusaka, Zambia

² Department of Business Studies, National Institute of Public Administration, Lusaka, Zambia

³ Department of Communication and Languages, National Institute of Public Administration, Lusaka, Zambia

Abstract

This study examined the effect of customer service on customer retention. A case study of two fuel service stations were used. It assessed how employee attitude, service speed, and customer service strategies influence customer retention. A mixed-methods approach was employed, integrating quantitative data from 399 customer questionnaires and qualitative insights from 10 in-depth interviews. Pearson's correlation analysis revealed strong positive relationships between each service factor and customer retention: employee attitude ($r = 0.817$, $p < 0.000$), service speed ($r = 0.967$, $p < 0.000$), and customer service strategies ($r = 0.881$, $p < 0.000$). The results highlighted the critical role of frontline staff behavior, efficient service delivery, and personalized customer engagement in fostering customer retention. The study recommended regular staff training to enhance interpersonal skills, process improvements to increase service speed, and the use of customer feedback systems to support continuous service quality enhancement.

Keywords: Customer service, effect, customer retention, employee attitude and speed service

Introduction

The fuel service industry has undergone a significant transformation in recent years, driven by advancements in technology, shifts in consumer behavior, and increased competition. Among the various factors that contribute to business success, customer service has emerged as a pivotal element that can distinguish successful enterprises from their competitors. For fuel service stations, which operate in an environment characterized by fierce competition and a plethora of consumer choices, exceptional customer service can serve as a key differentiator that not only attracts customers but also retains them over the long term (Ullah, Ranjha & Rehan, 2018; Kumar & Shah, 2015).

With the rise of alternatives, such as convenience stores, customers now have a wide range of options. Consequently, merely providing fuel or basic services is no longer enough; fuel service stations must offer a superior customer experience to build strong, lasting relationships with their clientele. High-quality customer service not only attracts customers but also fosters loyalty, ensuring repeat business and significantly enhancing customer retention rates in an industry where consumer choices are plentiful. Fuel service stations that prioritize customer service as a central component of their business strategy can develop a competitive advantage, creating a more resilient customer base and ensuring sustained profitability.

In the context of fuel service stations, customer service encompasses a wide range of interactions between employees and customers, each of which can directly impact the customer's overall experience and likelihood of returning. These interactions include not just the quality of assistance provided, such as how knowledgeable and helpful the staff are, but also the speed of service, the cleanliness and ambiance of the location, and the overall atmosphere in which the service is delivered (Peltier, Skidmore & Milne, 2013; Zeithaml, Bitner & Gremler, 2018) ^[27]. Customers today expect more than just functional service; they seek a

holistic experience that makes them feel valued and appreciated. Numerous studies have demonstrated that positive customer interactions lead to higher levels of satisfaction, which in turn fosters customer retention (Anderson & Mittal, 2000). When customers feel valued and well-treated, they are more likely to engage in repeat business, provide referrals, and remain loyal to the service station over time. This is especially critical for fuel service stations, where customer transactions are often brief but can have lasting effects on customer perceptions and loyalty. The brief yet frequent nature of these interactions makes it all the more important for fuel service stations to create positive, memorable experiences for customers. The quality of service provided during these short interactions can influence customers' decisions to return for future visits and can significantly impact their overall satisfaction with the brand.

Furthermore, the importance of customer service in the service station context is magnified by the evolving expectations of modern consumers. Today's customers are more informed, discerning, and empowered than ever before. With easy access to information and customer reviews via digital platforms, consumers are increasingly seeking value that extends beyond the mere availability of products or services (Smith & Smith, 2017). They prioritize experiences that are personalized, efficient, and emotionally engaging. For fuel service stations, this shift in customer expectations calls for a change in approach, one that prioritizes not just the product (fuel) but also the experience surrounding it. Customers are more likely to choose a fuel service station that offers a welcoming atmosphere, attentive staff, and convenient services that meet their individual needs. The emotional connection formed between a customer and a fuel service station is often what influences their decision to return, and this connection is largely built through positive customer service interactions. As such, fostering an environment that emphasizes exceptional

service can create a significant competitive advantage, enabling fuel service stations to stand out in a crowded market and retain a loyal customer base.

Despite the clear acknowledgment of customer service as a crucial driver of business success, many fuel service stations operate without a comprehensive understanding of how specific aspects of customer service quality directly correlate with customer retention and overall sales performance. This gap in knowledge can hinder the ability of fuel service stations to formulate effective strategies that enhance customer service and consequently improve customer retention rates (Oliver, 2010). For instance, while some stations may invest heavily in speed of service or offering promotions, others may fail to recognize the critical importance of interpersonal service quality, such as how staff interactions influence the likelihood of repeat visits. Addressing this gap is crucial, as it allows businesses to tailor their service offerings to meet customer needs more effectively, ultimately leading to improved customer satisfaction and retention.

Moreover, the fuel retail sector in Zambia has become increasingly competitive, with the number of fuel service stations rising dramatically from 275 in 2015 to 614 in 2024, marking a 223% increase (ERB, 2016; ERB, 2024). Despite this expansion, national petroleum consumption has only increased by 30% during the same period (ERB Annual Report, 2015; ERB Annual Report, 2024), suggesting that competition among service stations has intensified. In such a competitive environment, customer retention has become a critical challenge, especially in an industry where pricing is uniform, and switching costs for customers are low. Given that customers have a wide array of choices, simply attracting customers is not enough; retaining them over the long term is key to maintaining profitability and market share. Without effective strategies to foster loyalty, fuel service stations risk losing their clientele to competitors who may offer similar products but provide a superior customer experience. Failure to address customer retention could result in reduced sales, decreased customer lifetime value, and ultimately a weakened market position.

This study, therefore, aims to investigate the effect of customer service on customer retention at PUMA and Total Energies fuel service stations in Kabulonga Township, Lusaka, Zambia.

Literature Review

Customer Service and Customer Retention

Research has shown that customer service is a critical determinant of customer satisfaction, loyalty, and ultimately, sales performance. For instance, a study by Anderson and Sullivan (2010) found that customer satisfaction significantly affects repeat purchase intentions, which is particularly relevant for service stations that rely on repeat customers for sustained revenue. Similarly, Grewal *et al.* (2009) demonstrated that service quality directly influences consumer perceptions of value, leading to enhanced loyalty and higher sales.

In the petroleum sector, the competitive landscape necessitates a strong focus on customer service as a means of differentiation. A study by Ruyter and Wetzels (2000) indicated that service stations with superior customer service offerings experienced higher sales growth compared to their counterparts. This aligns with findings from more recent research, such as that by B2B International (2021),

which highlights that service quality is a key driver of customer retention in the fuel retail industry.

Factors Influencing Customer Perceptions

Several studies have explored the specific elements of customer service that contribute to positive consumer experiences. According to Zeithaml *et al.* (2000), factors such as responsiveness, assurance, and empathy are crucial in shaping customer perceptions of service quality. In the context of service stations, these dimensions can translate into practical measures, such as the speed of service, the professionalism of staff, and the ability to address customer inquiries effectively.

Moreover, research by Bitner (2010) emphasized the role of the physical environment in customer service interactions. For service stations, aspects like cleanliness, signage, and the availability of amenities can significantly impact customer perceptions and, consequently, sales. The interplay between these factors suggests that a holistic approach to customer service—encompassing both human interactions and the physical environment—is essential for optimizing sales performance.

Many studies have been conducted on assessing the customer service and its effect on marketing in the business setup. The oil marketing industry is not an exception for such studies. Chatterjee (2019)^[4] evaluated the effects that customer service has on customer behaviour. The study was based on the analysis of the existing literature on the subject matter. In passing conclusions, the author concluded that customer service avenues such as commitment, trust, financial bonding, cooperation, and empathy should be implemented by banks towards its customers in order to develop a sense of trust and satisfaction among the employees and as a result boost customer retention rate and loyalty.

In a related study, Lo (2012)^[17] also analysed the different empirical studies conducted by others to establish the relationship between customer service and customer satisfaction. The results indicated that organizational adopted strategies significantly influence customer satisfaction. In passing conclusions, the author pointed out that satisfaction and trust are the two main pillars of any organization. Taleghani, Chirani, and Mirrashed (2011) also viewed effective customer service practices as a strong approach to effective customer retention.

Bataineh, Al-Abdallah, Salhab, and Shoter, (2015)^[2] analyzed the effect that customer service has on customer retention through relationship quality in the pharmaceutical business sector of Jordan. The study involved 500 retail pharmacies located in Amman and Zarqa. The results of their study revealed that communication has a significant and negative effect on relationship quality. The seller's expertise on the other hand was found to have a positive and significant effect on relationship quality. In addition, customer service was found to have a significant positive effect on customer retention.

Gashti and Chirani (2022)^[9] evaluated the impact of customer service on the attitude of customers, putting emphasis on the role that advertising effectiveness plays in the banking industry of Tehran. The study population was composed of all employees, managers and relevant experts in Bank Mellat. A total sample size of 221 was used for the study and this sample was selected based on the Krejcie and Morgan table through the random process. The data was

analyzed using the structural equations model. Customer service was found to have a significant effect on customer attitude.

Knowledge Gap and Contribution of Study

In conclusion, while existing studies have offered valuable insights into the relationship between customer service and customer retention, notable gaps remain. The methodologies used across these studies vary and limited consideration of contextual factors. Furthermore, regional and local perspectives particularly within African markets are underrepresented, highlighting the need for more context specific research. This study seeks to address these gaps by providing a focused analysis of customer service and its effect on customer retention in the context of fuel service stations in Zambia. In doing so, it aims to contribute both to academic literature and to practical decision making for stakeholders such as the Energy Regulation Board (ERB) and fuel station managers.

Theoretical Framework

According to Creswell, (2014), a theoretical framework is a single formal theory. When a study is designed around a theoretical framework, the theory is the primary means in which the research problem is understood and investigated. A conceptual framework includes one or more formal theories (in part or whole) as well as other concepts and empirical findings from the literature. It is used to show relationships among these ideas and how they relate to the research study.

The Commitment-Trust Theory of Customer Service

The Commitment-Trust Theory, proposed by Morgan and Hunt (1994), emphasizes the role of trust and commitment in long-term relationships between businesses and customers. According to this theory, successful relationships are built on trust, mutual commitment, and a shared understanding of each other's needs. It asserts that trust is the foundation for relationship longevity, while commitment leads to positive outcomes like customer retention.

Relevance to the Study

Staff Attitudes: Positive staff attitudes are central to building trust with customers. Employees who show professionalism, empathy, and responsiveness foster trust in the company, which leads to greater customer commitment and loyalty.

Service Speed: Quick and efficient service can enhance trust, as customers appreciate the company's ability to meet their needs without delays. This fast, reliable service strengthens the customer-business relationship, contributing to retention.

Customer Service Strategies: Customer service strategies that focus on trust-building (such as personalized service or loyalty programs) are critical in ensuring customer commitment. A commitment to consistently meeting customer expectations ensures that customers remain loyal and continue to return to the service station.

The SERVQUAL Theory (Service Quality Model)

Overview: The SERVQUAL model, developed by Parasuraman, Zeithaml, and Berry (1988) [26], is one of the

most widely recognized frameworks for assessing service quality. The model is based on the premise that customer satisfaction and retention are influenced by the gap between customer expectations and their perceptions of the service they receive. SERVQUAL identifies five key dimensions of service quality: tangibles, reliability, responsiveness, assurance, and empathy.

Relevance to the Study

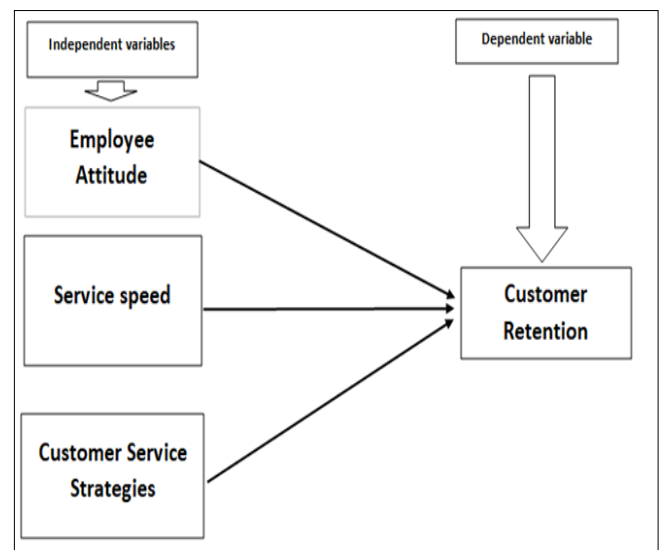
Staff Attitudes: The SERVQUAL model emphasizes empathy and responsiveness, both of which are directly related to staff attitudes. Positive employee behavior, such as attentiveness and care, can directly enhance customer perceptions of service quality, leading to higher satisfaction and retention.

Service Speed: The SERVQUAL model also includes the responsiveness dimension, which deals with how quickly and efficiently services are provided. Faster service is directly linked to higher perceptions of service quality, which can drive customer loyalty and retention.

Customer Service Strategies: The SERVQUAL framework can guide fuel service stations in evaluating their service quality across various dimensions, helping them to develop strategies for improving customer service and retention.

Conceptual Framework

The conceptual framework was developed based on the commitment-trust theory and the service quality theory of customer service practices. This study focuses on customer service practices and customer retention in the Petroleum industry. The effect of customer service practices was tied to unique services offered by service stations and the challenges faced when by consumers at the same service stations. The priori expectation is that there is a positive effect on the three independent variables of the model.



Source: Author

Research Methodology

This study adopted a mixed methodology research approach. This is because the study sought to assess the effects that the variable customer service has on customer retention. And the study made use of numerical measures

such as the inferential measures to analyse the quantitative data and themes to analyse the qualitative data.

Sample and Sampling Technique

This study adopted a convenience sampling technique. This is because the study was conducted from the filling stations and data was collected from the drive-in customers. However, the sample size of 399 was calculated using the Taro Yamene formula with 5 percent precision error. Qualitative data for the study was collected using an interview guide, which was designed to facilitate in-depth conversations with participants regarding their experiences and perceptions of customer service at the selected fuel service stations. Respondents were selected purposively, meaning that the researcher specifically chose individuals who were believed to possess relevant insights into the research topic, which are staff or regular customers with the operations of the service stations. The sampling continued until the researcher reached data saturation, which occurred at the 10th respondent.

Data Analysis

In this study, a quantitative method of analysing the data was used. The analysis was done using Statistical Package for Social Sciences (SPSS) after which a raw data summary sheet is to be prepared and labelled as an appendix. The data was summarized by way of frequency tables and interpretation given based on the findings. Responses are to be collected accordingly. Similar responses are to be grouped together to aid further analysis and data presentation. Tables, graphs, and charts will be used to present the findings.

The qualitative data collected from the interviews was analysed using thematic analysis, a widely used method for identifying, analysing, and reporting patterns (or themes) within data. Thematic analysis involves a systematic process of reading through the interview transcripts, coding the data into meaningful categories, and then identifying recurring themes that represent the underlying patterns in the responses.

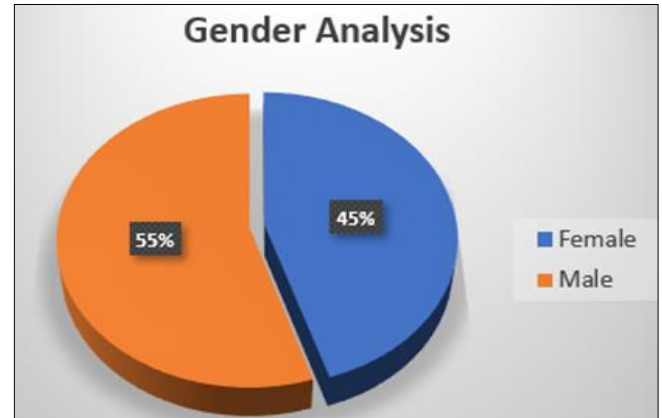
The researcher first familiarized themselves with the data by transcribing and reading through the interview notes. Then, significant statements or ideas were coded and grouped into potential themes based on commonalities in the participants' responses. Once the themes were identified, they were reviewed, refined, and organized into broader categories that best represented the key aspects of the participants' experiences regarding customer service. This method enabled the researcher to extract detailed and nuanced insights from the data, highlighting the most important factors that influence customer retention at the selected fuel service stations. Thematic analysis provided a flexible approach to understanding complex qualitative data, allowing for the emergence of rich, context-specific findings that were directly aligned with the research objectives.

Results

Demographic information

Of the total 399 respondents, 219 (54.9%) were male, while 180 (45.1%) were female. This indicates that males make up a marginally larger proportion of the sample, with a difference of 39 respondents, or approximately 9.8%, more females than males. This distribution suggests that female

customers may either be more frequent or more inclined to participate in the study.



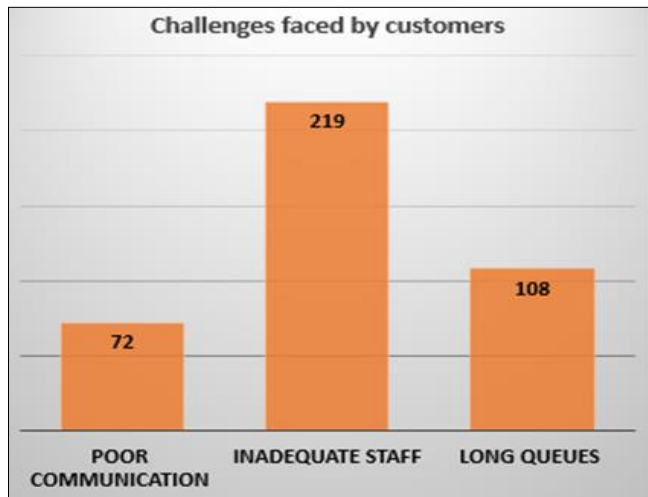
Age category

The age distribution data reveals important insights into the demographic composition of the respondents and their potential impact on customer behavior at fuel service stations. The largest group of respondents is in the 35-44 age range, accounting for 27.3% of the sample, followed by the 25-34 group at 21.8%. Together, these two age groups make up nearly half (49.1%) of the total respondents, suggesting that individuals in these age ranges are significant customers for fuel service stations. These age groups likely represent people in their peak earning and spending years, which may influence their purchasing behaviors at service stations. The 45-54 age group also makes up a substantial portion at 18.8%, indicating that middle-aged adults are another key demographic.

On the other hand, the 55 and above group represents 15.3% of the sample, while the 18-24 group comprises 16.8%. The smaller percentages in these age categories suggest that older and younger customers may have different service expectations or usage patterns. For example, younger customers might prioritize convenience and affordability, while older customers may seek higher levels of personalized service and quality. This age distribution highlights the potential need for fuel service stations to tailor their offerings to the distinct needs of each group.

Descriptive statistics

Customers at fuel service stations face several key challenges that significantly impact their satisfaction and loyalty. The most prominent issue is inadequate staffing, reported by 219 respondents, which leads to slower service during peak hours and results in overworked employees who struggle to manage queues and engage with customers effectively. This not only causes delays but also diminishes the quality of service and emotional connection with customers, ultimately threatening long-term retention. Long queues and prolonged wait times were also highlighted as major concerns by 108 respondents, who expressed frustration over inefficiencies and poor queue management, particularly when wait times are not communicated. Additionally, 72 respondents cited poor communication as a source of dissatisfaction, noting unclear instructions, lack of signage, and insufficient updates during service delays. These combined issues create a negative customer experience that can drive customers to seek faster, more organized alternatives, reducing repeat visits and risking market share loss.



Inferential statistics

The results of the correlation analysis indicate that employee attitude plays a significant role in customer retention, with a strong positive correlation of 0.817 (p = 0.000). Previous studies have also emphasized the importance of employee behavior in shaping customer experiences and enhancing retention (Gavilanes *et al.*, 2022).

Similarly, speed delivery shows a very strong positive correlation with customer retention (0.967, p = 0.000), highlighting that quicker service leads to greater customer satisfaction. The importance of fast service has been well-documented in retail and service industries, where customers tend to stay loyal to businesses that can meet their needs efficiently (Wang *et al.*, 2021).

Lastly, the analysis also reveals a strong correlation between customer service strategies and customer retention (0.881, p = 0.000). Previous research has shown that adopting effective customer service strategies not only improves customer satisfaction but also strengthens long-term loyalty (Ramkumar & Wann, 2021). These findings align with the existing literature, which emphasizes the need for businesses to continuously refine their customer service approaches to ensure sustained customer loyalty.

Correlations from SPSS output

	Customer Retention
Customer Retention	1
Pearson Correlation	
Sig. (2-tailed)	
N	399
Employee Attitude	.817**
Pearson Correlation	
Sig. (2-tailed)	.000
N	399
Speed delivery	.967**
Pearson Correlation	
Sig. (2-tailed)	.000
N	399
Customer Service Strategies	.881**
Pearson Correlation	
Sig. (2-tailed)	.000
N	399

Conclusions

This study has provided a comprehensive examination of the factors influencing customer retention at the two fuel service stations in Kabulonga Township, focusing on employee attitude, service speed, and customer service strategies. The findings highlight several key conclusions that are critical to understanding customer retention in the fuel retail industry.

Firstly, the study found that employee attitude plays a pivotal role in fostering customer retention. Customers consistently reported that friendly, helpful, and professional staff members were key contributors to positive experiences and encouraged repeat business. A positive employee attitude was strongly linked to customer satisfaction, reinforcing the notion that well-trained, motivated, and customer-focused employees significantly influence retention rates. This suggests that improving employee attitudes through training and incentive programs could enhance customer experiences and drive customer retention. Secondly, the research revealed that service speed is a crucial determinant of customer retention. Faster service delivery was directly associated with higher levels of customer satisfaction, while long wait times led to frustration and decreased likelihood of return visits. Customers valued efficiency, and stations that minimized delays and provided quick service had a higher retention rate. Therefore, optimizing service speed, particularly during peak hours, is essential for improving customer satisfaction and maintaining a competitive edge in the market.

Additionally, customer service strategies emerged as a key factor in influencing customer retention. The study highlighted the importance of personalized, responsive, and clear communication between staff and customers. Effective customer service strategies, such as addressing customer needs promptly, providing relevant information, and resolving issues quickly, were found to enhance overall customer satisfaction. The study suggests that adopting customer-centric approaches in service delivery, ensuring clear communication, and creating personalized experiences can contribute significantly to customer retention.

In conclusion, the study demonstrates that a combination of positive employee attitudes, efficient service delivery, and well-structured customer service strategies are essential for improving customer retention in the fuel retail industry. The findings underscore the importance of focusing on these areas to enhance customer service quality that will result in having customer satisfaction and retention in a highly competitive market.

Recommendations

Enhance Employee Training and Engagement: Organizations should invest in regular training programs focused on improving employee attitudes and behaviors, particularly those that directly influence customer interactions. Encouraging a customer-first mindset among employees can be pivotal in boosting customer retention.

Optimize Service Speed: Given the strong correlation between service speed and customer retention, businesses should look for ways to streamline their processes and reduce service delays. This may involve optimizing

operational workflows, adopting technology for quicker service delivery, and constantly monitoring service performance to identify and address bottlenecks.

Strengthen Customer Service Strategies: Businesses should continuously evaluate and improve their customer service strategies. Implementing personalized service, proactively addressing customer concerns, and using customer feedback to refine service delivery can strengthen customer retention. Developing a customer-centric culture, where customer needs are at the forefront, will likely lead to higher retention rates.

Invest in Customer Feedback Mechanisms: Organizations should also prioritize gathering and analyzing customer feedback to better understand the effectiveness of employee interactions, service speed, and overall customer service strategies. Regular customer surveys or feedback loops can provide valuable insights into areas that need improvement

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