SERVICE ENCOUNTERS IN THE FAST FOOD INDUSTRY-CASE OF MIDLANDS PROVINCE

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ABSTRACT
The study sought to evaluate the service encounter in the Fast Food Industry in the Midlands Province. The main objectives being to find out the types and effectiveness of service encounters, to determine the importance of the service encounter, to identify important attributes required of the contact personnel, physical facilities (Tangibles) and processes, find out causes and impact of the service encounters and to identify the expectations of Customers after service encounter failure.

Descriptive research was employed in the research. Six Fast Food Outlets from Gweru Urban were used in the study. A sample size of 180 respondents was used and the response rate was 170 representing a 94% response rate. Both self administered questionnaire and personal interview were used as the main research instruments. The non-probability sampling method, which is judgmental, was used to select the Fast Food Outlets as well as respondents of the study.

The key findings of the study were that the most used service encounter types in Fast Food Outlets are face-to-face, telephone and remote service encounter, though face-face service encounter is mostly pronounced type. The main causes of service encounter failures were found to be people, physical facilities and processes related. Also it was found that if service encounters are executed properly, they could be used organisation as source of competitive advantage and enhance viral marketing. However service encounter failures may lead to negative word of mouth. Right appearance and right personality came out, as the most needed attributes required of contact personnel over attributes like education and previous experience. The findings showed that Nescafe and Innscor and to an extent Wimpy are the most effective in giving their customers memorable service encounters. The research recommends that Fast Food Outlets invest a lot in service encounter so that they lock up their customers in the face of stiff competition in the industry.

KEYWORDS: Service, Service Encounter, Fast Food Outlets

1. Introduction
The Fast Food Industry in Zimbabwe has grown over the years as a result trade liberalisation in sector in the early 1990s, which allowed number of players especially black entrepreneurs to open their own Fast Food Outlets. This has, among other factors been attributed to the urban growth because of rural-urban migration-movement of people from rural areas to urban centres.
According to Harare City Council’s strategic plan of 2003 urban population has increased by an average of 13%. Also the change in the family set-ups especially in the urban areas where in modern families, both the husband and the wife go to work and wives are no longer associated with the kitchen and other home chores. With less cooking at homes, families have now resorted to fast food from Fast Food Outlets, hence the increase in the demand of the fast food (Hospitality Association of Zimbabwe Newsletter, Vol 4, 2000). The growing demand of the fast food has contributed to the increase of players in the industry. According to the Hospitality Association of Zimbabwe congress minutes of (2005), the Fast Food Industry has been growing by an average of 6 percent per annum since early 1990s, considering only the registered Fast Food outlets. Also according the report there are several unregistered food outlets throughout the country. This increase resulted in intense competition, each player trying to achieve dominance in the industry.

The coming in of indigenous owned food outlets during the formative years of the economic liberalisation in the Industry during the early 1990s also intensified the competition (Financial Gazette, 12-09-04). The lucrative ness of the industry is shown by the increase of profits. Fast Food giant Innscor who operates a number of Strategic Business Units such as Chicken Inn, Bakers, Pizza In, The Steers and Nandos Franchise had a turnover of $78.7billion (not revalued) and a net profit of $14.6billion (not revalued) (Insider Publications 2005). However according to the same source the industry earned an average profit of 5 percent above average inflation for the period. This makes the sector one of the best achievers in the economy. The industry achievement is attributed among other factors to the drought and shortage of basic commodities, which forced some people to buy food from the food outlets.

According to the Insider Publications, (2005) the harsh economic environment prevailing in the country through the hyperinflation is likely to put pressure on customer’s purchasing power. Also according to the Zimbabwe Congress of Trade Union’s working document of 2006, 87 percent of the people are unemployed and many companies are being threatened with high operation costs. If this situation persists, the point will be arrived where numerous players in the Industry will be chasing very few customers.

Therefore for the companies in the fast food industry to remain in business it is required to be proactive and come up with strategies that give it a competitive edge against other food outlets. Service Encounters or “moment of truth” is where promises are kept and broken and is one area which organisations in the fast food industry should pay more attention to, in order to have a competitive advantage over other players. According to Zeithaml and Bitner (2003) service encounters are sometimes called “real-time marketing.” It is from these service encounters that customers build their perceptions about the company. It is in these encounters that the customer receives the snapshot of the organisation’s service quality and each encounter contributes to the Customer’s overall satisfaction and willingness to do business with the organisation gain. From the organisation’s point of view, each encounter thus presents an opportunity to prove its potential as a quality service provider and to increase customer loyalty (Parasuraman, Zeithaml and Berry (1988)).

2. Statement Of The Problem
Due to the increase in the number of service providers in the fast food industry, the customers are faced with unlimited options. As a result the customers are becoming very demanding and
disloyal moving from one Fast Food Outlet to the other seeking for better services. The service encounter(s) seems to be one area, which the firms in the industry can use to attract and retain customers from their rivals. However it seems the Fast Food Outlets in the industry are not doing enough to improve customer satisfaction through effective service encounters. This is causing customer disloyalty hence the future of some players in the industry is under threat.

3. Research Objectives
i) To determine the effectiveness of service encounter type(s) mostly used in the Fast Food Industry.
ii) To determine the importance of the service encounter in Fast Food Industry.
iii) To identify important attributes required of the contact personnel, physical facilities and processes in an effective service encounter.
iv) To identify the causes and impact of service encounter failures in Fast Food Industry.
v) To identify the expectations of customers after service encounter failure.

4. Theoretical Framework
Service Encounter occurs where it is necessary for consumer and producer to meet in order for the former to receive the benefits, which the latter has the resources to provide (Bitner, A., 1992). This concept has been defined broadly by Shostack, G.L, (1995) as “a period of time during which a consumer directly interacts with the service.” This definition includes all aspects of the service firm with which a customer may interact, including its personnel and physical facilities. Czepiel J.A., Solomon, M.R., and Surprenant, (1995) also defines service encounter as the time frame during which the consumer directly interact with the service provides. This implies that all the elements an encounter for example the physical facilities, waiting times, and of course service personnel are involved. Service encounter according to Bitner, A (1990) is also the “Moment of Truth” where the service provider translate its promises into tangible actions- ‘You do not get a second chance to make you’re your first impression’.

However from the definitions given by above authors Service Encounter involves the aspects, which lead to satisfactory and dissatisfactory. And this state of affairs is determined by the time and quality of interaction between the customer and the service provider’s personnel and physical assets. Interestingly all the above authors agree on the key variables of the service encounter.

4.1 Types Service Encounters
A service encounter occurs every time a customer interacts with the service organizations. Zeithaml, and Bitner, (2003:102) noted that there are three general types of service encounter remote encounter, phone encounter and face-to-face encounters. A customer may experience any of these types of encounters, or a combination of all the three.

Remote Encounters - occurs without direct human contact such as when a customer interacts with the bank through the ATM system, with Ticketron through an automated ticketing machine, with the retailer through its Internet website. Although there is no direct human contact in these remote encounters, each represents an opportunity for the firm to reinforce or establish quality perceptions in the customer (Lovelock, C.H., 2000). In remote encounters according to Bitner
(1990) the tangible evidence of the service and the quality of the technical processes and system become the primary basis for judging quality.

**Phone Encounters** - Almost all firms (whether goods manufacturer or service businesses) rely on phone encounters in the form of customer service, general enquiry or order-taking functions. The judgment of quality in phone encounters is different from remote encounters because there is greater potential variability in the interaction. Tone of voice, employee knowledge and effectiveness or efficiency in handling customer issues becomes important criteria for judging quality in these encounters. The coming in of mobile phones has added a new impetus in these types of service encounters.

Customers now can text message for Dial-A-Delivery to Innsco and the food is delivered to him or her at her or his home without physically visiting the Fast Food Outlet.

**Face-To-Face Encounter** – According to Lovelock (2000) it occurs between an employee and customer in direct contact. In food Outlet it occurs between customers and food and beverages servers. Determining and understanding service quality issues in face-to-face contexts is the most complex of all. According to Parasuraman et al (1985) both verbal behaviors are important determinants of quality, as are tangible cues such as employee dress and other symbols of service (equipment, informational brochures, physical setting). In the face-to-face encounters the customer also plays a role in creating quality for herself/ himself through her/his own behaviour during the interaction.

### 4.2 Importance Of Service Encounters

Although early events in the encounter cascade are likely to be especially important, any encounter can potentially be critical in determining customer satisfaction and loyalty (Zeithaml and Bitner, 2003). If a customer is interacting with a firm for the first time, that initial encounter will create a first impression of the organisation. In these first encounter situations, the customer frequently has no other basis for judging the organisation, and the initial phone contact or face-to-face experience with a representative of the firm can take on excessive importance in the customer’s perceptions of quality and the perceived service delivery. Even if the customer has had multiple interactions with a firm, each individual encounter is important in creating a composite image of the firm in the customer’s memory (Bateson, 1989). Many positive experiences add up to a composite image of high quality whereas many negative interactions will have the opposite effect (Zeithaml and Bitner 1996). On the other and, a combination of positive and negative interactions will leave the customer feeling unsure of the firm’s quality, doubtful of its consistency in service delivery, and vulnerable to the appeals of competitors (Edvardsson, and Strandvik, 2000). For example, a customer of restaurants could have a series of positive encounters with the account manager or the salesperson. These experiences could be followed by positive encounters with the operations staff that actually set up the food facilities. However, even with these positive encounters, later negative experiences with the staff that serve the food or the accounting department that administer the account and the billing procedure can result in a mixture of overall quality impression. This variation in experiences could result in the corporate customer wondering about the quality of the Organisation and unsure of what to expect in the future. Each service encounter with different people and departments representing the food service provider adds to or detracts from the potential for a continuing relationship (Heung and Lam, 2003).
According to Zeithaml and Bitner, (2003), common logic suggests that not all service is equally important in building relationships. For every Organisation, certain service encounters are probably key to customer satisfaction. In Fast Food outlets, it is the early encounters that are most important. Aside from common key encounters, there are some momentous encounters that, like the proverbial ‘one bad apple,’ ruin the rest and drive the customer away no matter how many or what type have occurred in the past. This can occur in connection with very important events and may seem inconsequential (Carlzon, 1987).

5. Methodology
A survey was used as the method of investigating the objectives of this study. The survey was descriptive, as some service encounter variables were known. A survey was used because it facilitated broader coverage within the framework of the Fast Food Outlets staff that was interviewed.

The research design was relevant in the understanding of the service encounters. It was used to uncover sources of satisfaction and dissatisfaction in the service encounters. The method allows the researcher to come up with both qualitative and quantitative data.

This made it easier to relate the opinions of customers and the opinions of contact personnel, of the incidents or the service encounters in the Fast Food Industry. The descriptive research design was also ideal for its ability to yield conclusive results like overall perception of the service encounters, its viability and how to improve the effectiveness of service encounters in the Fast Food Industry.

The population of this study was made up of all the 19 Fast Food Outlets in the Midlands Province. Also the population included the management, employees, and all the customers of the respective Fast Food Outlets.

The research used the non-probability sampling method known as judgmental, which enables the research to choose sample elements exercising his own judgment. Using the aforesaid method, the researcher chooses Fast Food Outlets, which are popular in Gweru Urban. The services of the outlets were regarded as the best, which can be benchmarked by other Fast Food Outlets in small towns and growth points in the Midlands Province. The researcher used prior knowledge of the population to choose the elements of the sample. The method made it easier for the researcher to administer questionnaires, and conduct interviews, because the Fast Food Outlets could be conveniently be accessed, as they are not distance apart. This was also appropriate to take advantage of time and related costs. Also considering that the country is experiencing the shortage of fuel, including sample elements outside Gweru Urban, could have created a lot of accessibility problems.

Focus was on the following six (6) Fast Food Outlets: Innscor (Chicken Inn, Bakers Inn, Cream Inn, Nandos and Pizza Inn), Wimpy Nescafe, Danny’s Kitchen, Safeway and Tim Take-Away. This sample of Fast Food Outlets constitutes 32% of the population. These organisations have a reputation of being well established in this industry.
Table 1: Sample Size Composition

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Food Outlets</th>
<th>Innscor</th>
<th>Safeway</th>
<th>Danny’s Kitchen</th>
<th>Wimpy</th>
<th>Nescafe</th>
<th>Tim</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Management Staff</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Contact Personal</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Customers</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>30</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Total Sample Size – 180

In the use of the questionnaire in this study, the respondents were asked to perform two types of cognitive tasks, namely indicating their level of agreement on the scale of responds on the closed ended-questions, as well as their raking of potential reasons on the open-ended questions.

To get in-depth and undiluted information personal interviews were carried out with management staff of the six sampled Fast Food Outlets. Appointments were made a week before the interview. The respondents were given the research interview guide also a week before the interview, to give them time to prepare for the interview.

6. Research Findings and Discussions

The findings are present under each

6.1 Response Rate

170 respondents from the sample of 180 responded. The high response which translates to 94% is attributed to the sampling techniques- judgmental and convenience which were used by the researcher.

6.2 Types of Service Encounter Used in Fast Food Industry

The employees and management were asked to identify the types of service encounters mostly used in the Fast Food Industry. They confirmed Face to face, telephone and remote encounters were all used in the industry.

The findings show that face-to-face, which constitutes 65% of the service encounter types used in the Fast Food Industry, is the most commonly used type. This is attributed to the fact that for the service to be offered, the presence of the person requiring service is required in most times. Telephone service encounters are second place with 26% degree of use. This is so because some customers book for their meals in advance before they go physically to receive the service or sent an agent to collected their packed meals. However the remote service encounter is the least used type of service encounter with a 9% degree of use, reflecting low levels of technological use as most of the Food Outlets do not have self-service technologies.

The contact personnel because of their experience with service encounters were asked to rate the three (3) types of service encounters which are commonly used in the Fast Food Industry. The effectiveness is shown in Figure 4.1 below.
Figure 1. Shows that 90% employees confirm that Face-to-Face service encounters are the most effective in Fast Food Industry. Telephone service encounters are relatively effective as 20% respondents classified them as effective, 16 very effective, 10 somewhat and 8 not effective. Remote encounters are not popular as 48 employees submitted that, they are not effective in the industry. These findings are consistent with other work, such as Jackson et al (2002), which suggest that face-to-face service encounters are the most effective in the service industry compared to the tangibles or physical facilities.

6.3 Rating Of The Impact Of Service Encounter Types By Employees
The study also sought to establish the effectiveness of the service encounter type. Respondents were asked to show the impact of each type on a scale 1-5 against given factors.

Table 2. Arithmetic Mean For The Impact Of Service Encounter Types.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Factors</th>
<th>Face to Face (Mean)</th>
<th>Telephone (Mean)</th>
<th>Remote (Mean)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Reliability</td>
<td>4.12</td>
<td>3.05</td>
<td>2.29</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Assurance</td>
<td>4.24</td>
<td>3.17</td>
<td>2.22</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Flexibility</td>
<td>3.97</td>
<td>2.71</td>
<td>2.02</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Memoribility</td>
<td>4.09</td>
<td>2.40</td>
<td>1.88</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Responsiveness</td>
<td>4.86</td>
<td>3.19</td>
<td>1.69</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Trustability</td>
<td>3.29</td>
<td>2.21</td>
<td>2.78</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Confidentiality</td>
<td>2.21</td>
<td>2.25</td>
<td>2.60</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Accessibility</td>
<td>2.59</td>
<td>3.05</td>
<td>2.22</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Personalization</td>
<td>2.83</td>
<td>3.09</td>
<td>1.60</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Aggregate (Mean)</td>
<td><strong>3.58</strong></td>
<td><strong>2.79</strong></td>
<td><strong>2.14</strong></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Table 2. Shows that the Fast Food Outlets under study, face-to-face service encounters on average have higher impact levels of reliability, assurance, flexibility, Memoribility, responsiveness, and trustability as compared to the users of telephone and remote service encounters. Face-to-face service encounter has got an impact of an average of 3.58 which is higher than the Telephone and remote service encounters which have aggregate mean averages of 2.79 and 2.14 respectively. Remote service encounters have high level of confidentiality whilst telephone service encounters have high impact in accessibility and personalisation.

6.4 The Importance Of Service Encounter in Fast Food Industry.
The study sought also to establish the important of service encounter in Fast Food Outlets. The importance thereof was measured on perception building, competitive advantage, and viral marketing (likelihood of satisfied customer to be part-time marketers for the Fast Food Outlet).

6.4 (a) Importance Of Service Encounter In Building Perception
Customers were asked if service encounter were important in the building of either positive or negative perception about the Fast Food Outlet. The findings are shown in Figure 4.3 below.

Figure 3 Importance Of Service Encounter On Building Perception
Figure 3. Shows that 65% of the customers submit that service encounter is very important in building either a positive or a negative perception about a particular Fast Food Outlet. 20% confirmed that service encounter is important in this regard and 10% are unsure while only 5% submitted otherwise. The results seems to be agreeing with Zeithaml and Bitner (2003) who says service encounter gives a snapshot of the organisation’s service quality and the positive perception of the encounter encourage the customer to do business with the organisation again.

6.4 (b) Likelihood Of Satisfied Customers Becoming Part-Time Marketers Of The Fast Food Outlet
Also to find the importance of service encounter the customers were asked if they are likely to be part-time marketers (Viral Marketing) of their respective Fast food outlets after they have received a memorable service encounter. The results are shown in Figure 4.
The findings show that satisfactory service encounter promotes viral marketing (satisfied customers being part-time marketers for the organisation). 60% of Nescafe customers confirmed that they are most likely to become part-time marketers for the Fast Food Outlets, while 40% and 38% for Innscor and Wimpy respectively submitted to the same effect. This may mean that the three outlets are good in service encounter. In contrast 30%, 30% and 29% for Tim, Safeway and Dannys’ Kitchen respectively submitted that they were unlikely to be part-time marketers. This seems to indicate that their service encounter are not good enough and may market the outlets negatively. However the results vindicates that if the customers are happy about the service encounter of a food outlet they will definitely market it positively through word of mouth. The effect is also the same, if the customers are not happy; they also market a food outlet negatively.

6.4 (c) Service Encounter As Source Of Competitive Advantage.
The importance of service encounter was also measured on whether it was able give a Fast Food Outlet a competitive advantage. The question was targeted on the management staff who was asked to agree or disagree on the notion. The findings are shown in Figure 6 below.
Figure 5. Indicates that service encounter is important as it enhances particular Fast Food Outlet’s competitive advantage. An average 50% of the management staff of all the Fast Food Outlets agrees that service encounter can be a source of competitive advantage. These results seem to conform to Palmer (2004) who said Service Encounter can be used by organisations as a source of differentiation.

6.8 Important Attributes Required Of Contact Personal, Physical Facilities (Tangibles), And Processes In An Effective Service Encounter.

6.8.1 Responses On The Important Attributes Of Contact
The management staff and the customers are asked to identify important attributes required of contact personnel for them to give an effective service encounter. The customers gave their responses through a structured questionnaire while the management staff was interviewed.

6.8.1 (a) Important Attributes Of Contact Staff By Management Staff
The management of the six (6) Fast Food Outlets was asked to identify the important factors of contact personnel in the fast food industry and identify previous experience, right industry qualifications, right personality and right appearance.

Figure 6 Important Attributes and Capacities Of Contact Personnel

Figure 6 indicates that 80% of management staff of the Fast Food Outlets suggests that the right personality was critical in contact staff for them to give the customers an effective service encounter. Equally 76% of the management staff surveyed felt that the right appearance was critical and 20% as important, only 4% of the respondents had mixed feelings. These figures can be compared with qualifications with 40% of the staff seeing qualifications as critical, 32% felt it was important and 22% classified it as somewhat for the contact staff to give an effective service encounter. These findings are inconsistent with the work of Jackson et al. (2002) and Zeithmal and Bitner (2003), which suggest that the right personality and right appearance as the most critical factors in frontline staff compared to qualifications.
6.8.1 (b) Important Attributes Of Contact Personnel As Expected By The Customers In The Service Encounter

The customers were asked to identify the important attributes they expect from contact personnel and rate the attributes as critical, important, somewhat and not important.

Table 3 Important Attributes Of Contact Personnel As Expected By The Customers

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Attributes</th>
<th>Critical (%age)</th>
<th>Important (%age)</th>
<th>Somewhat (%age)</th>
<th>Not Important (%age)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Friendliness</td>
<td>85</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Eloquence</td>
<td>61</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Courtesy</td>
<td>79</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Skills</td>
<td>49</td>
<td>37</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Attire</td>
<td>91</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Confidence</td>
<td>76</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Listening Ability</td>
<td>87</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Empathy</td>
<td>45</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dedication</td>
<td>41</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>28</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Knowledge</td>
<td>51</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 3 indicates that the customers views all the attributes namely friendliness, eloquence, courtesy, skills, attire, confidence, listening ability, empathy, dedication and knowledge as critical in an effective service encounter. However attire, listening ability and friendliness are the most as evidenced by their high percentages 91, 87, and 85 respectively. Therefore it entails that Fast Food Outlets with employees who exhibit the above attributes are likely to have fruitful service encounters with the customers.

6.8.1 (c) Importance Of Tangibles (Physical Evidence) In The Service Encounter.

Customers were asked to rate the role played by Tangibles (physical evidence) in the service encounter. The tangible attributes namely tables layout, corporate colours, design of the building, evidence of technology, staff uniform, firm brochures, and utensils quality were given and the customers were asked to rate the attributes as very important, important, indifferent, and Not important.
Table 4. Importance Of Tangibles (Physical Evidence) In Service Encounter

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Attributes</th>
<th>Very Important</th>
<th>Important</th>
<th>Indifferent</th>
<th>Not Important</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Table Layout</td>
<td>60</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Corporate Colours</td>
<td>71</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Design of Buildings</td>
<td>40</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Evidence of Technology</td>
<td>48</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Staff Uniform</td>
<td>82</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Firm Brochures</td>
<td>79</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Utensils eg plates</td>
<td>49</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 4 shows that customers are very particular with the state of physical evidence in a service encounter. At average 74% of customers suggest that table layout, corporate colour, design of building, evidence of technology, staff uniform, firm brochures, and utensils play a very important role in service encounter, with 15% saying they are important. Only 1% indicates otherwise. Therefore tangible cues of Fast Food Outlet play a pivotal role in the determination of an effective service encounter.

6.8.1 (d) Importance Of Processes In Service Encounter

With a view to get what the customers expect about the processes in Fast Food Service encounters, they asked to categorise their views under four categories critical, Important, somewhat and Not important.

![Figure 7 Importance Of Process Dimensions In Service Encounter](image-url)
The results in figure 7 shows that customers value highly the opening time, closing time, paying procedures and serving time in a Fast Food Outlets. This is shown by an average of 68% of the customers who classify the aforesaid processes dimensions as critical.

6.9 Causes Of Service Encounter According To Individual Fast Food Outlet

Figure 8 shows the magnitude of the causes of service encounter failures in the respective Fast Food Outlets under study. The service encounter failures are group under people, processes, physical evidence and others.

![Figure 8 The Causes Of Service Encounter Failures](image)

Customers suggested that Nescafe and Innscor have least frequency of the causes of service encounter failures as they enjoy the lowest frequencies in respect of people, processes and Physical evidence. On people related failures Innscor has got 20% while Nescafe has 15%. Food Outlets like Tim Take-Away, Safeway and Dannys’ Kitchen according to the findings have high people. Processes and physical Evidence related causes of service encounter. This may mean that their staffs are not well trained, their processes are not customer friendly and their physical cues are not attractive to the customers.

6.10 Impact of Service Encounter Failures

The study also focused on the impact of the service encounter failures.

6.10.1(a) Spreading Of Negative Word Of Mouth

Customers were asked if they are likely to spread negative word of mouth about the Favourite Fast Food Outlet in event of a service encounter failure.
Figure 9 Likelihood Of Customers Of Spreading Negative Word Of Mouth

Figure 9 shows that 60% of the customers are very likely to spread negative word of mouth about their unpleasant experiences with Fast Food Outlet to third parties, 15% are likely to do the same. 23% are not sure of what action they may take, while only 2% are unlikely to spread negative of mouth. The results imply that any service encounter failure is likely to have severe consequences to the Fast Food Outlet. This seems to be in conformity with Folkes, (1984) who said one service encounter failure could cost the existence of any service provider.

6.10.2 (b) Likelihood Of The Customers Of Giving Fast Food Outlet Another Chance After A Service Encounter Failure

The customers were asked if they are likely to give their favourite Fast Food Outlets in the event of service encounter failure.

Figure 10 Likelihood Of Giving Fast Food Outlet A Chance After Service Encounter Failure
Figure 10 indicates that customers place much importance on the service encounter. This is supported by 40% of the customers who said they very unlikely to give a Fast Food Outlet a second chance after a service encounter failure. 10% are unlikely, 30% likely, 10% unsure and 10% very likely.

![Bar graph showing customer responses to service encounter failure](image)

**Figure 11. Impact Of Service Encounter Failure On Loyalty**

Service encounter failure has got a negative impact on customer loyalty. 27% of the customers are very lowly unlikely to remain loyal to the Fast Food Outlet, while further 27% are lowly likely to remain loyal. This makes an aggregate score of 56% customers who are likely to switch to other Fast Food Outlets. This is a big percentage when compared to 18% and 13% who are very highly likely and highly likely respectively to remain loyal to a particular Fast Food Outlet.

7. Conclusions
The main conclusions from the findings were as follows:

- The major types of service encounter used in the Fast Food Industry include Face-to-face, telephone and remote service encounters. However face-to-face emerged as the highly used as compared to the other two. From the findings, face-to-face contribute 65% of the service encounters in the Fast Food Industry. Also the results indicate that face-to-face is the most effective service encounters type in giving customers satisfaction.

- Memorable service encounter was very important in perception building. 65% of the customers confirmed that positive or negative perception about a particular Fast Food Outlet emanates from service encounter(s).
• In addition the findings concluded that if Fast Food Outlets improves on the service encounter, then satisfied customers can subconsciously or consciously be part-time marketers for the organisation. From the findings Nescafe and Innscor as the best in providing memorable service encounters and 55% on average expressed that, they can be part-time marketers for the respective Fast Food Outlets. Also any discrepancies in the service encounter(s) have the same effect, but on the reverse side.

• Important attributes of contact staff identified in the study include the right qualifications, previous experience, right personality and right appearance. Customers expressed right personality and right appearance as critical attributes over right qualifications and previous experience. For example 76% of the respondents confirmed that right appearance is critical in an effective service encounter.

• Tangibles as table’s layout, corporate colours, design of buildings, evident of technology, staff uniform, firm brochures and menu lists, and utensils were identified as importance physical evidence cues and this was confirmed by 74% of the customers.

• The research concluded also that processes elements serving time, paying procedures, waiting time closing and opening times, and complain processes were of paramount importance as highlighted by above 40% of the customers.

• Causes of service encounter failure were identified as people, processes and physical evidence related. Causes under people included uncaring staff, inefficient or slow staff, favouratism, out-of-ordinary behaviour by employees, and jumping of queue by other customers. Processes failures among others include ineffective outdated technology, lack of self-service technology, poor queue systems, long paying procedures, and unavailable meals. Physical evidence comprises of unattractive corporate colours, unattractive staff uniform and old furniture and equipment. Nescafe and Innscor were confirmed as Fast Food outlets with very few people, processes and physical evidence related service encounter failures. Fast Food Outlets like Dannys’ Kitchen, Tim and Safeway, 25 % of the customers said most of their service encounter failures are related to people, processes and physical evidence.

• The impact of service encounter failure included the spreading of negative word-of-mouth. 60% of the customers submitted that they would spread negative word-of-mouth in event of service encounter failure. Also on the same platform 40% of the customers confirmed that they would not give a Fast Food Outlet a second chance after service encounter failure. Therefore this means Fast Food Outlets show work serious on their service encounters.

• Also the study revealed that service encounter had a bearing on the loyalty. An aggregate of 56% of the customers studied indicated that they were likely to be disloyal to the Fast Food Outlet in the face of service failure.
Lastly the research study concluded that the customers expect Outcome Fairness, Procedural Fairness and Interaction Fairness. Outcome Fairness included being given equivalent compensation, an apology and promise of future free services. Procedural Fairness included easy access to complain process, fairness in terms of rules and policies and timeliness of the complain process. Interaction fairness included showing politeness, honesty and care in addressing customer complains.

8. Recommendations

Basing on the findings and conclusions thereof the researcher proposes the following recommendations:

- To improve on the degree of use of other service encounter type(s) like remote service the researcher recommend the Fast Food Outlets to acquire self-service technologies especially for standard products like soft drinks and juices. After all such technologies will promotes standardization of services thereby eliminating people bias that was found to be one of the causes of service encounter failures.

- On recruiting of contact people, the Fast Food Outlets should look beyond the qualifications and previous experience and look at other attributes like right personality and attitude. The results showed that customers regard personnel’s personality and attitude towards them over attributes like qualifications and previous experience.

- Fast Food Outlets could undertake a deliberate education campaign to educate the customers on what the firms offers in the event of service encounter failure. This means they could spell out type of compensation they offer, the compensation procedures and the type of service encounter failures open for compensation.

- Also the researcher recommends Fast Food Outlets to involve customers when deliberating on issues that have to do with service encounter, so that the customers can advance their input and also understand areas, which the Fast Food Outlets are, handicapped to correct.

- The Fast Food Outlets could improve on their waiting conditions especially during the period of high demand. They can do this by introducing some form of entertainments, for example video viewing during the waiting times.

- At times service encounters failures are inevitable, therefore the Fast Food Outlets should make it easy for the customer to access the complain process. In fact they should encourage customers to complain so that they can improve the service encounters taking it from the complaints. They could introduce suggest boxes and complain desks.
• As way to enhance the complaining process the researcher recommends the Management of Fast Food Outlets to empower the contact employees, so that will be able to solve of the problems as they occur. Timeliness in rectifying mistakes was found as one of the strategies expected by the customers.

• Fast Food Outlets could make their physical evidence appealing, increase the sitting capacity where possible and neatly dress their contact personnel. This is based on the research findings, which suggest that some customers are not happy with physical cues of some of the Fast Food Outlets under study.

• Also recommend for Fast Food Outlets to engage a full time customer service officer in charge of all the points of interaction, so that there is thorough monitoring of all interaction processes. This is in the view that service encounter can give firms competitive advantage.

5.3 Recommendation For Further Research
The researcher recommends for further research in area of service encounter in Fast Food Industry in Zimbabwe especially Telephone service encounters. There is no much literature on this type of service encounter. Many researchers have dealt much on face-to-face service encounter.

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