

EXPECTATIONS OF CUSTOMER AS A STAKEHOLDER OF AN AGRICULTURAL ENTERPRISE: CASE STUDY

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Purpose: to present the possibilities of using the CSI (Customer Satisfaction Index) method to manage relations with customers as one of the stages of managing company's stakeholders.

Project/ methodology/ approach: the studies were carried out in two stages. The first stage comprising a direct interview was used to identify the criteria used by the customers of agricultural products when choosing a supplier. In the second stage, after the criteria were grouped with the use of questionnaires, their order of importance was determined.

Findings: the method of reaching to the customers used in the study relies on the application of the main criteria that they take into account in their decisions. These are: freshness, flavour, price and appearance of the product. Perception of these criteria is important for the studied entity on account of the specific location of the sales point.

Study Limitations/Implications: the proposed method was tested with respect to the selected business entity. In the next stages, it is necessary to test its application in other industries in order to receive a broader range of the picture about perception of key stakeholders by the organisation. The results show critical points to which the company resources should be assigned in order to improve customer satisfaction and loyalty.

Practical Implications: the received results may be a prompt for the studied company and may indicate directions of development of stakeholder management, along with the areas that should be improved in this respect. Independent and uniform measurement characteristics of the studied model constitute a useful tool for carrying out a systematic comparative analysis in time. It also provides information about the weak and strong sides of the company in the opinions of its customers.

Social Implications: the paper indicates the possibility of reciprocal impact of the main sides of the process: the customer and the company. The studies indicate the possibility of using the CSI method for the first stage of managing the relations with the customers, namely learning the degree of validity of various criteria when purchase decisions are made. Thanks to the use of the CSI method, it is possible to determine an efficient strategy of impact on the customers, using the criteria that are of major importance for them.

Originality/Value: the authors made an attempt at using a tool from the realm of the CSI quality management for the process of managing a company's stakeholders. This is possible by learning the importance of the individual criteria which are guiding the customers' purchase decisions. This may inspire the companies to use the tool in the process of stakeholder management.

Keywords: CSI, relations, stakeholders, customers.

Paper category: scientific paper, case study.

1. Introduction

The functioning of any organisation at the market is conditioned by a number of factors. These factors include, without doubt, relations with stakeholders of a given organisation. In the case of a company, the parties interested in its operation include primarily entities directly related to the organisation. They are the company's employees, clients and other entities delivering goods and services necessary for the performance of operating activities by the company. Along with the socio-economic development, the number of entities that directly impact the company is successively growing. Fulfilment of the company's goals is increasingly dependent on the entities located in its environment, both the closest and the further one. The key stakeholders that exert significant impact on the performance of financial goals of the company next to the owners, the employees and the cooperating partners are the company's customers – they are called the first degree stakeholders (Żelazna-Blichorz, 2013). Familiarity with the customers' expectations with respect to the products and services offered to them allows for preparation of a product that is going to be more satisfactory for the customer and this – in a long term perspective – may improve the company's sales dynamics. That is why identification of customer requirements pertaining both to the products and other components directly related to them is a very important aspect in the functioning of every organisation. From the point of view of formation of proper relations with customers, an important element is identification of factors which the customers take into account and determination of the degree of their validity, so that an offer for the customer can be adequately prepared on this basis. Taking the above into account, the authors of the paper attempt to indicate the possibilities of using a method from the group of quality assessment methods, namely Customer Satisfaction Index, to assess its significance from the point of view of purchases of agricultural products offered by XYZ in Gdynia. Based on the factors identified and arranged in order according to their significance for the stakeholders/ customers when purchasing the goods, the company's strategy of making the products available to the customers may be determined. In the analysed case, the strategy of making products available used by the company that was covered by the study was evaluated.

2. Stakeholders and Stakeholder Management

All organisations, including enterprises, are becoming more and more dependent on the impact of the environment, i.e. a set of entities and factors that surround them (Downar, Niedzielski, 2006). In the middle of the 20th century, entities within the environment of an organisation were defined as stakeholders (Smolska, 2016). The term stakeholders was defined by Stanford Research Institute in 1963 and the premises related to this approach became, over the next years, a foundation for development of the concept of corporate social responsibility (CSR). Initially, the stakeholder theory referred to the groups which, by their support, contributed to the existence of a given organisation. This concept was pursued in the 1970s in R. Ackoff (Ackoff, 1974). The concept of a stakeholder defined as a person or a group of persons that influences or may influence the accomplishment of the goals of a company was introduced in 1984 by Freeman (Freeman, 1984). Since that moment, the concept has been used more and more often in the company management theory, and in particular in the management of actions pursued by companies and defined as projects. This follows from the fact that a stakeholder does not necessarily have to impact the entire enterprise – such impact may only be limited to a project or just a process implemented as part of the enterprise (Smolska, 2016). The popularity of the stakeholder concept (in particular in the scope pertaining to projects) is systematically growing, together with the growth of the significance of projects in the operation of business entities – in particular, this is happening particularly quickly in the 21st century. The analysis of English language literature on project management carried out between 1984 and 2009 showed a successive growth in the use of this term along with the advent of the year 2009 (Grucza, 2019). Developing the stakeholder theory, Freeman presented both the broad and the narrow meaning of the term. The broad meaning of the term determines the stakeholders as a group of persons or individuals who affect the goals accomplished by an enterprise or are ‘subjected to the impact on the part of an enterprise accomplishing its goals’. In other words, it is a group or an individual who ‘experienced harm or benefit from an enterprise’ (Roszkowska, 2011). The narrow approach to this concept defines the stakeholders as a group which determines the survival of an enterprise. Clarkson presented the stakeholders as the entities introducing risk, which determine the survival of a company. The author assumes that ‘an enterprise is defined as a system of basic groups of stakeholders and may survive in a long-term perspective only when it is capable of creating value for all the groups’ (Clarkson, 1994). Popularity of using the stakeholder concept in the case of projects resulted in a definition of this term prepared by an organisation involved in project management methodologies. And thus, according to the most popular organisation associating persons managing projects, PMI, a stakeholder is ‘an individual, group, or organisation, who may affect, be affected by, or perceive itself to be affected by a decision, activity, or outcome of a project’ (PMI PMBok 6th Edition, 2017). Similar definitions of stakeholders were also prepared by other organisations

associating project managers (as part of the IPMA or PRINCE2 standard (www.ipma.pl, www.prince2.pl). Attention should be paid to the fact that in the majority of definitions, bilateral impact both of the organisations/ actions on the stakeholder and impact in the other direction, i.e. of the stakeholder on the organisation/ action is indicated. Existence of both parties (organisations/ actions and stakeholders) thus results in mutual relations between them, determined as social relations (Adamska-Chudzińska, 2014), which are the basis of operation and development of an enterprise (Smolska, 2016). This happens thanks to the increase of the capacity to compete by the use of diverse resources of an enterprise and thanks to the building of a competitive advantage (Adamska-Chudzińska, 2014) – the above two elements are accomplished owing to the relations established with the stakeholders. Relations established by an enterprise, in particular with key stakeholders, may be treated as a resource that needs to be managed (Smolska, 2016; Sawhney, Zabin, 2002) in order to accomplish the designated goals in an effective way. Correct management of stakeholders requires a number of actions in the area of planning, organisation, motivation and controlling (Danielak, 2012). In the simplest model of efficient stakeholder management, a three-stage process has to be performed. In the first place, identification of stakeholders should be carried out – this stage of stakeholder management is of vital importance for the efficiency of the entire process (Dziadkiewicz, 2020). In the next stage, the identified stakeholders must be characterised in detail, which means determination of the major values that they expect from an organisation. As part of the last stage, based on the stakeholder characteristics, it is necessary to determine a strategy of impact on the stakeholders, which would assist the fulfilment of the entity's goals (Bukowska, 2008; Misiak, Serwach, 2016). Taking into account the first degree stakeholders, i.e. the company's customers, an important factor that describes them and that affects the purchase-related decisions made by them, is the degree of customer satisfaction. Measurement of this parameter is necessary in building relations with the customers and in consequence conditions stakeholder management (Adamczyk, 2009).

3. Customer Satisfaction Measurement Tools

Relations among stakeholders participating in the process should consist in mutual trust, which will translate to an increase in the level of satisfaction. The level of satisfaction depends on the levels of expectations, which are variable in time and depend on the user's expectations. Ongoing monitoring of this phenomenon is greatly important because based on the results of measurements, it is possible to react immediately and avoid dissatisfaction of any of the parties participating in the process. If lack of satisfaction is noted, action should be taken rapidly, primarily to diagnose the causes of the dissatisfaction and subsequently to improve the relation.

A number of instruments can be used to measure customer satisfaction. Survey studies performed on-line may be used to this aim, or via telephone, or face to face, processing of complaints and suggestions, analysis of loss of customers (Wolniak, 2016; Afthanorhan et al., 2019; Vatawala et al., 2022), the mystery shopping method (Blessing, Natter, 2019), or the commonly known Servqual method (Vencataya et al., 2019). It relies on the determination of size of gaps between the quality expected by the client and the actual level of the provided service. The measuring tool of the SERVQUAL method is a questionnaire, which comprises 22 statements divided into five areas: tangibles, reliability, responsiveness, assurance and empathy. The method assumes that different recipients of the service may perceive the offer different and are going to assess it differently. Thence, it is important to define the area of difference between these two variables, in order to adjust the parameters of the service in a way that they can fulfil the customer's expectations to the broadest extent possible.

The instruments used to examine customer satisfaction also include the Kano method, which relies on assigning features of a service to the groups defined by the author of the method. This classification is based on the degree of satisfaction or dissatisfaction of the customer with the presence or absence of a given feature (Minh et al., 2015) and assumes occurrence of must-have, performance, attractive, indifferent and reverse features (Kano et al., 1984).

To measure the degree of the stakeholders' satisfaction with the relations that were worked out by the parties interested in the process, the CSI (Customer Satisfaction Index) method can be applied. It greatly contributes to the process of showing the relation between a supplier and a recipient (customer) and pictures the degree of customer satisfaction with the service or the product offered to the customer. This method may be used to show the internal relations between the stakeholders and the studied organisation with the so-called quality map, as well as used for the benchmarking studies (Ariffin et al., 2022). The quality map may be used to indicate actions that should undergo corrections in order to accomplish improvement. The method relies on the assumptions that customer satisfaction depends on such factors as: perceived quality, perceived value, customers' expectations, company image (Türkyılmaz, Özkan, 2007). Development and application of the CSI led to the emergence of various types of customer satisfaction indicators applied in various countries (Eboli, Mazzulla, 2005, Chen et al., 2015).

4. Role of Customer Opinions in Stakeholder Management

It seems that the current financial situation may contribute to changes in the consumers' conduct at the market, including the market of food products – given the information about the commencing crisis, the price of the product is going to be a more and more important factor, affecting purchase decisions. In spite of the fact that food products are predominantly first

necessity products, as a result of development of the crisis situation, a gradual decrease in demand for such products is observed. In such case, the entrepreneurs should carefully look at the customers' requirements and align their offer to the customers' expectations. Fulfilling all such expectations is practically impossible; that is why it is important to determine the value of individual customer expectations and to align the offer to them.

4.1. Study Purpose and Methodology

With a view of aligning the offer to the customers' expectations (main stakeholders), the entrepreneurs can use instruments that are dedicated to measuring a generally perceived quality of services and products. That is why the purpose of the study is to present the possibility of using one of such methods, namely the CSI, to shape the entrepreneur's relations with its main stakeholders. The research problem is to search for the answer whether the CSI may be used as a tool allowing for subsequent construction of a relation of an entrepreneur with a customer. The authors put forward a hypothesis that the CSI method may not only be used to assess the quality of services, but also to manage the relations with stakeholders. Following a positive verification of the hypothesis that was put forward, it will be possible to apply the instrument to shape the communication strategy with the stakeholders, which may be a basis for maximising the enterprise's operating goals.

The study entity is an enterprise from the agricultural and food industry which, as part of its strategy of reaching to the customers, embarked on an innovative form of selling its agricultural products. They are available to the customers seven days a week, 24 hours a day, in a specially prepared self-service sale point. The commercial stand is located directly by the seat of the company and this allows for its ongoing monitoring and offers a possibility of controlling the level of stock of the goods along with efficient re-stocking. Payments are usually made in a non-cash form, but there is also a possibility of paying with cash left by the customers in a dedicated box.

The stakeholders of the studied entity are: customers, employees and suppliers of components necessary in the production process of the agricultural products. Given the purpose of the study, the customers' expectations with respect to the offered goods were subjected to an analysis.

The study was carried out in two stages. In the first one, thanks to the direct interviews carried out with 24 customers, identification of factors affecting the purchase decisions was made. The task of the study participants was only to indicate the factors that are important for them in the process of making purchase decisions of agricultural products. Next, a questionnaire form was prepared that formed the basis for collecting information about the significance of the previously listed criteria for another group of respondents. This stage was carried out in the first and third week of September 2022 (in every week, the studies were carried out on two business days, between 3.00 p.m. and 6.00 p.m. and on Saturdays and Sundays between 12.00 and 4.00 p.m.). At this stage, 88 respondents were studied in total; 68% of them were women. All the respondents lived in the Tri-City or the neighbouring area.

4.2. Results and Conclusions from the Study

The first stage of the study showed that the following factors pertaining to the product are taken into account during purchase decisions of agricultural products: price, availability, flavour, freshness, appearance and packaging: type and size, as well as the aesthetic of the sale point. These criteria were singled out with the use of the similarity diagram and the application of it allowed for selection of indications, removal of repetitions or determinations describing comparable criteria.

At the second stage, the respondents, using the Likkert scale, indicated the significance of the identified criteria. To designate the reliability of the measurement of the scale of answers used, Cronbach's Alpha was used (Cronbach, 1971), which amounted to 0.7233, which indicates a satisfactory reliability of the scale of answers applied in the study. Table 1 and figure 1 present the results received from assessment of individual criteria by the respondents. In the case of the figure, the criteria assessed by the respondents were ordered from the least significant to the most significant.

Table 1.

Scale of importance of the analysed purchase-related criteria

Criterion	Arithmetic mean	Standard deviation	Coefficient of variation
Price	5.88	1.16	19.79%
Availability	5.28	1.42	26.91%
Flavour	6.52	0.73	11.14%
Freshness	6.72	0.62	9.29%
Appearance	5.53	1.46	26.41%
Type of packaging	3.86	1.50	38.88%
Packaging size	4.15	1.73	41.77%
Store aesthetics	4.65	1.59	34.22%

Source: Authors' own studies based on the results of performed studies.

It follows from the analysis of the received answers that the three criteria with the highest significance for the respondents in the case of food products were: freshness, flavour and then price. Attention should be paid to the fact that in the case of the two most important criteria (freshness and flavour), the variability coefficient of the answers received was very small (for freshness, 9.29% and for flavour 11.14%), which indicates very slight divergence in the responses received from the respondents – they were close to the average value received (for freshness 6.72 and for flavour of the product, 6.52). The three criteria that were listed by the respondents as the ones to which they pay least attention were: type of packaging (average 3.86), size of packaging (average 4.15) and aesthetics of the store (average 4.65). In case of these criteria with the lowest significance for the respondents, the variability coefficient was higher, which indicates greater divergence in the received answers – for the type of packaging it amounted to 38.88%, for the size of packaging it was the highest at 41.77% and for the store aesthetics it amounted to 34.22%. Attention should be paid to the relatively great extent of significance indicated by the respondents, occurring between the most significant criterion – product freshness (6.72) and the least significant one – type of packaging (3.86) – the extent of significance amounts to 2.86.

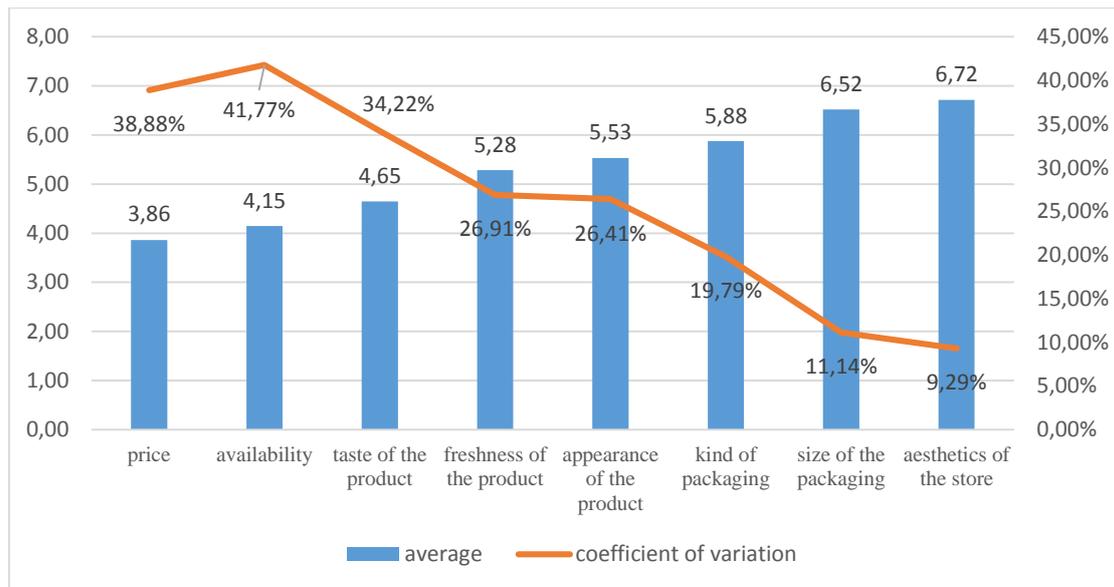


Figure 1. Scale of importance of the analysed purchase-related criteria.

Source: authors' own studies based on the results of performed studies.

The strategy of reaching the customers used by the analysed company makes use of the main factors that the customers take into account in their purchase decisions. Location of the store in the vicinity of the harvesting location of the products guarantees their freshness, which definitely also affects their flavour and appearance. This also affects the practically zero costs of transport, which indirectly influences the price of purchase of the offered products. The mode in which the products are offered to the potential customers (24 hours a day, 7 days a week) in a self-service point may be deemed another criterion that is conducive to building positive relations with the customers. The three criteria considered least significant by the respondents (type of packaging, size of packaging and aesthetics of the store) seem to be taken into account in the least degree in contacts with the customers in case of the analysed entity.

5. Recapitulation

The actions of the managers of an enterprise have a dual dimension. On the one hand, they are forced to produce products and services compliant with the expectations (e.g. standards) and on the other, they have to satisfy specific demands of their customers. It should be noted that such demands are not permanent and the managers have to analyse changes occurring in the customers' expectations on an ongoing basis. These changes follow from a number of factors. The main ones affecting changes in the customers' expectations include, among others: economic progress, competitiveness at the market, financial standing of the economy, customers' awareness and interests. An entrepreneur should be 'focused on the customers', satisfy their demands and even foresee their future expectations. Such an approach

relies on the organisation's capacity to determine the customers' requirements and subsequently defining the steps to fulfil them. To be focused on the customers, the managers must have tools at their disposal that allow for identification of needs of the major stakeholders, namely the customers, and this issue applies, in principle, to every industry (Ogrodnik, Mieszaniec, 2017).

The paper presents an instrument from a group of methods used in the quality management process, which may be efficiently used to identify the customers' preferences and expectations. The study presented in the paper indicates the criteria that should be taken into account by the studied company from the agricultural and food industry. The analysis contained in the paper may be recommended as the first stage of the process of building a company's relations with its customers as part of stakeholder management. In the next stage, one has to answer the question whether the analysed enterprise proceeds in line with the customers' expectations. A supplement for the presented studies should be performance of a broad assessment of specific criteria, thanks to which strong and weak sides of an organisation are going to be identified. Creation of the so-called quality map may serve this purpose, which pictures the correlation of significance and assessment of the studied criteria (Kauf, Tluczak, 2017). At the same time, attention should be paid to the fact that alignment to the customers' expectations is an initial stage for changes introduced in an enterprise. In the next steps, the remaining areas of operation of the entity should be aligned to the introduced changes (Nita, 2016). The results of the research conducted using the CSI method indicated that it can serve as an effective tool for assessing the quality of services and goods offered by an enterprise. It is the basis for forming relationships with the enterprise's customers.

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