



Logistics customer service levels in Poland: Changes between 1993 and 2001

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Abstract

Customer service plays an important role in companies acting in new market economies of Central Europe. Assessment of customer service is possible while adopting different standards reflecting various aspects of that service. This paper presents results of surveys of Polish companies in the period 1993–2001. Those surveys show that Polish manufacturers changed their attitudes towards customer service and its competitive advantage aspects. They are aware of growing customer requirements and adopt sets of standards to evaluate that service. However, several drawbacks can be indicated in the field of practical use of those standards such as low quality or sporadic reports and accidental use. © 2004 Elsevier B.V. All rights reserved.

Keywords: Customer service; Benchmarking of customer service; Performance measurement

1. Introduction

Several years of market economy functioning in Poland has brought about many tremendous and profound changes in operations of Polish companies. Narrowing profit margins and growing market segmentation meant that the managers in Polish companies slowly started becoming aware of the fact that a business that is successful in the long term is one that provides for the needs of its customers better than its competition. Therefore, one of the major problems in the near future of Polish companies would concern strategy and management of customer service. It has already

become the “modus operandi” of manufacturing companies.

However, the desire for extensive growth of sales seems to prevail while dealing with demand constraints. The principles of modern logistics management become more and more popular, but the precise tools and methods for managing effectively the flow of goods are not common knowledge to the majority of managers as yet. Inventory policies, inventory control and managing precise relations of inventories to required logistics customer service levels still remain more a theory than practice in these manufacturing companies.

Periodical surveys of customers service levels and their management carried out by the author examine basic changes from 1993 till 2001. The analysis has been based on samples of manufacturing companies picked in a random manner from typical Polish companies operating in the southern part of Poland. The size of sample in 1993 was 52 companies (Kisperska-Moroń, 1996) and 87 companies in 2001. Samples from 1993 and 2001 did not include exactly the same companies since the objective of the research was not to follow customer service change in a particular group of companies. The basic goal was to find out what is the average picture of customer service level in 2001 when compared to the initial period of transformation in the beginning of the 1990s. However, four particular branches of companies out of the whole sample have been compared: metal, metallurgical, chemical and light industry. In the sample surveyed in the year 2001 electronic and engineering industry have been distinguished since companies belonging to those branches formed larger data group than in 1993.

2. Multiple aspects of customer service

Customer service is a very wide term and varies from one company to the next. Moreover, vendors and customers view that concept quite differently. Without going into sublime theoretical disputes, the term “customer service” in this paper has been used in a very broad sense. It denotes not only a function or activity that has to be managed, such as order processing, invoicing and post sale support, but mainly deals with the total corporate philosophy and attitude leading to the planned action in the company and the market (Stock and Lambert, 1987).

In practice, in order to make some diagnostic statements about customer service one has to be able to measure the performance of the logistic system and how well that system creates time and place utility for a product. The most popular classifications divide the elements commonly associated with customer service into three groups: pre-transaction, transaction and post-transaction (Ballou, 1994; La Londe and Zinszer, 1976).

Discussion presented in this paper will take into account some of the basic elements and indicators of customer service:

1. Availability of an item, representing the ability of the supplier to satisfy customers' orders within a time limit (accepted generally for a particular item). The number of stock-outs is a usual measure of product availability.
2. Delivery time, elapsing between receipt by the supplier of a firm commitment for an order and receipt of the goods by the customer.
3. Reliability, meaning the supplier's commitment to maintain a promised delivery schedule.
4. Accuracy of quantities and products ordered.

Those elements as a rule have the most significant connection to the lead-time and structure of inventories. These indicators were already analysed by the author in the past in order to illustrate the general practice of customer service management in Poland (Kisperska-Moroń, 1996; Kisperska-Moroń, 2003).

3. Manufacturers' perceptions of current market situation

The level of customer service and the value of the inventory required to support it depend on a wide range of diversified factors; nevertheless, it is generated mainly by the situation on the market and mutual relations between buyers and sellers. Since the, so-called, seller's market does not exist in Poland any more, at present manufacturing and trade companies have to be more aware of the patterns of customers' demand. Surveyed companies reported certain requirements that their customers expected from deliveries (Table 1).

Table 1 presents different factors that Polish companies have to consider while dealing with their customers. According to that opinion in 1993 market required first of all that deliveries included precisely the ordered assortment of goods and that deliveries were prompt. In that context, the quality of delivered products seemed to be only the third important factor, although the surveyed companies themselves suffered sometimes from poor

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