



Evaluating the Role of Training in Enhancing Customer Service Quality in Nigerian Retail Stores

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Abstract

The contemporary Nigerian retail landscape is characterized by intense competition and increasing consumer sophistication, yet persistent lapses in customer service quality (CSQ) remain a critical barrier to sustainable competitive advantage and customer retention. This study aimed to empirically evaluate the role and differential impact of various employee training types on perceived CSQ, measured through the customer's perspective, in Nigerian retail organizations. Utilizing a quantitative, cross-sectional survey design, data were collected from 412 customers and 145 frontline employees across major retail chains in Lagos and Abuja. CSQ was measured using a modified SERVQUAL instrument, while training effectiveness data were gathered from employee self-assessment and HR records, categorized into Product Knowledge, Soft Skills, and Service Recovery training. Multiple regression analysis revealed that both Soft Skills Training ($\beta=0.45$, $p<0.001$) and Service Recovery Training ($\beta=0.31$, $p<0.01$) were significant positive predictors of overall perceived CSQ. Specifically, soft-skill training exhibited a strong correlation with the Empathy and Responsiveness dimensions of service quality, which were also identified as the largest negative service gap areas. Conversely, a one-time product knowledge training showed a weak, non-significant link to overall CSQ. The findings underscore that a strategic, continuous investment in interpersonal and problem-solving skills is crucial to bridging the service delivery gap in the Nigerian context. The study concludes that training is a high-leverage investment that transforms employees from transactional clerks into empowered service agents, recommending a shift from basic product orientation to scenario-based training for sustainable retail excellence in Nigeria.

Keywords: Training Efficacy, Customer Service Quality, Nigerian Retail, SERVQUAL, Employee Development, Service Recovery, Customer Satisfaction

Introduction

The Strategic Imperative of Customer Service in Global Retail

In the global marketplace, competitive differentiation has shifted fundamentally from product and price to the quality of the customer experience (Berry, 2011) ^[3]. Customer Service Quality (CSQ) is now recognized as the pivotal metric for assessing organizational efficiency, driving customer loyalty, and ensuring long-term profitability (Parasuraman et al., 1988) ^[15]. As digital commerce and globalization expose consumers to international service standards, their expectations escalate rapidly, making the quality of frontline employee interaction the primary determinant of perceived value. For service-intensive industries like retail, the employee is the "moment of truth," directly responsible for co-creating the consumption experience (Gronroos, 2007) ^[5]. Therefore, the process of equipping these employees with the necessary competencies—intellectual, behavioral, and procedural—through effective training becomes a strategic, rather than merely operational, imperative.

The Dynamics and Challenges of the Nigerian Retail Sector

The Nigerian retail sector is undergoing a profound transformation. Historically dominated by informal, decentralized markets, the last two decades have witnessed the proliferation of modern, formal retail spaces, including large supermarkets, shopping malls, and specialty chains, particularly in major urban centers like Lagos, Abuja, and Port Harcourt. This formalization, driven by an expanding

middle class and foreign investment, presents both opportunity and unique challenges (Akinyele, 2022) ^[2].

The distinct operational environment in Nigeria introduces systemic pressures on service delivery. These include significant infrastructure deficits (e.g., unreliable power supply necessitating costly backup generation), complex logistical hurdles, and, often, a historically low prioritization of service standards across local businesses (Ezeh & Swart, 2020) ^[4]. Consequently, Nigerian consumers frequently cite poor customer service—manifested as long queues, staff indifference, lack of product knowledge, and inefficient complaint resolution—as a major pain point and a reason for brand switching (Adekunle & Johnson, 2021) ^[1]. The cost of these service failures is high: lost sales, negative word-of-mouth, and an inability to compete effectively with global e-commerce platforms that offer streamlined service experiences.

The cultural context of service in Nigeria also plays a mediating role. The nature of communication (often high-context) and traditional views on employee-customer relationships (sometimes involving a degree of power distance) can clash with globalized expectations of proactive, empathetic, and empowered service delivery. Successful service requires a culturally sensitive approach to training that transforms these interactions from transactional encounters into relational experiences.

Theoretical Foundations of Customer Service Quality (CSQ)

To systematically evaluate CSQ, this study employs the Service Quality (SERVQUAL) Model developed by Parasuraman, Zeithaml, and Berry (1988) ^[17]. SERVQUAL

defines service quality as the gap between customer expectations and their perceptions of the actual service delivered. The model is based on five core dimensions:

1. **Tangibles:** Appearance of physical facilities, equipment, personnel, and communication materials.
2. **Reliability:** Ability to perform the promised service dependably and accurately.
3. **Responsiveness:** Willingness to help customers and provide prompt service.
4. **Assurance:** Employees' knowledge and courtesy and their ability to inspire trust and confidence.
5. **Empathy:** Caring, individualized attention provided to customers.

While the SERVQUAL model is internationally recognized, its application in the Nigerian retail environment requires context-specific focus. Given the documented issues, it is hypothesized that the dimensions of Responsiveness (speed/willingness to help) and Empathy (caring/individualized attention) are the most critical, yet often the weakest, links in the Nigerian service chain, and thus, the most responsive to targeted training intervention.

The Role of Training: Linking Internal Quality to External Value

The foundation for linking training to CSQ lies in the Service Profit Chain (SPC) (Heskett et al., 1994) [6]. The SPC posits a direct relationship: Internal Service Quality (driven by training, empowerment, and work environment) leads to Employee Satisfaction, which in turn leads to Employee Retention and Productivity. These outcomes then result in higher External Service Value (CSQ) and ultimately Customer Loyalty and Profitability. Training, therefore, is the primary driver of internal quality.

This study distinguishes between three critical types of employee training and hypothesizes their differential impact on the SERVQUAL dimensions

1. **Product Knowledge Training:** Focuses on technical features, inventory, and location. Hypothesized to primarily impact Reliability and Assurance (knowledge component).
2. **Soft Skills Training (Behavioral):** Focuses on communication, active listening, body language, and courtesy. Hypothesized to be the major determinant of Empathy and Responsiveness.
3. **Service Recovery Training:** Focuses on handling complaints, managing stress, and empowering employees to resolve issues proactively. Hypothesized to significantly impact Reliability (fixing failure) and Responsiveness.

The lack of continuous training, particularly in soft skills and empowerment, often results in staff being unable to navigate unique, challenging customer interactions, falling back on rote, indifferent, or defensive behaviors.

The Research Gap and Study Objectives

While numerous international studies confirm the general positive correlation between training investment and CSQ, the empirical evidence is scarce and often generalized within the specific, evolving, and culturally distinct context of Nigerian retail. Prior local studies have tended to focus descriptively on the need for training rather than rigorously

evaluating the efficacy and differential impact of specific training types on the five measurable dimensions of CSQ.

This research aims to bridge this gap by conducting a robust, context-specific evaluation. The specific objectives are

1. To measure the existing gap between customer expectations and perceptions of service quality (CSQ Gap) across the five SERVQUAL dimensions in Nigerian retail stores.
2. To determine the relationship between employee-reported frequency and type of training (Product Knowledge, Soft Skills, Service Recovery) and the overall perceived CSQ score.
3. To ascertain which specific type of training (independent variable) is the strongest predictor of each CSQ dimension (dependent variables: Reliability, Responsiveness, Assurance, Empathy).
4. To provide evidence-based recommendations for strategic training investment that will yield the maximum improvement in CSQ in the Nigerian retail sector.

By isolating the predictive power of distinct training models on specific CSQ outcomes, this study offers actionable insights essential for retail managers and policymakers seeking to enhance the global competitiveness of Nigerian retail.

Methods

Research Design and Approach

This study adopted a quantitative, cross-sectional survey research design. The approach was both descriptive (to ascertain current training levels and CSQ gaps) and correlational/predictive (to determine the strength and nature of the relationship between training variables and CSQ outcomes). Data were collected at a single point in time from two distinct populations: frontline retail employees and their customers.

Study Area and Population

The study was conducted in two major commercial hubs in Nigeria: Lagos State (the economic capital) and the Federal Capital Territory, Abuja (the political and administrative center). These areas represent the peak concentration of formal, organized retail activity and cater to a diverse demographic with high expectations, making them ideal environments for evaluating CSQ.

The target population comprised

1. **Customers:** Individuals aged 18 and above who had completed a transaction in a sampled retail store within the previous 48 hours.
2. **Employees:** Full-time frontline customer-facing staff (cashiers, sales assistants, floor managers) of the sampled retail stores with a minimum of six months of continuous service.

Sampling Procedure and Sample Size

A stratified random sampling method was used to select the retail organizations, ensuring representation across three major retail categories: Supermarkets/Groceries, Electronics/Appliances, and Apparel/Fashion, thereby enhancing the generalizability across the sector. Within each selected store, two sampling techniques were employed:

- **Customer Sampling: Convenience sampling** was used at the exit of the stores. The research team intercepted customers and requested their voluntary participation.
- **Employee Sampling: Simple random sampling** was used, drawing employee lists from the HR departments of participating stores to select participants for the employee survey.

The minimum required sample size was determined using Cochran's formula for a population proportion, targeting a 5% margin of error. After data cleaning and accounting for incomplete responses, the final effective sample size was:

- **Customers (NC):** 412
- **Employees (NE):** 145

Instrumentation

Two distinct, structured questionnaires, predominantly employing a 5-point Likert scale (1=Strongly Disagree, 5=Strongly Agree), were developed and administered

1. Customer Service Quality (CSQ) Questionnaire (Administered to Customers)

This instrument was a modified version of the SERVQUAL model (22 items total). It contained two main sections:

- **Expectations (E):** 11 items measuring the customer's ideal expectations of service quality in the retail setting.
- **Perceptions (P):** 11 corresponding items measuring the customer's perception of the actual service received.

The CSQ Gap was calculated as $\text{Gap} = P - E$. A negative score indicates that perceptions fall short of expectations (a service quality deficit). The 11 items covered the five SERVQUAL dimensions: Tangibles (2 items), Reliability (3 items), Responsiveness (2 items), Assurance (2 items), and Empathy (2 items).

2. Employee Training and Attitude Inventory (Administered to Employees)

This instrument had three core sections

- **Training Variables (Independent Variables):** Measured the employee's self-reported frequency and duration of three specific training types over the last 12 months (e.g., "Hours spent in training on conflict resolution").
 - Product Knowledge Training (PKT)
 - Soft Skills Training (SST) (Communication, Interpersonal)
 - Service Recovery Training (SRT) (Complaint Handling, Empowerment)
- **Perceived Training Efficacy:** 5 items measuring the extent to which employees felt the training had prepared them for their roles.
- **Control Variables:** Employee experience, education level, and perceived management support for service quality.

The questionnaires were pilot-tested on a smaller sample (N=30) in a non-sampled retail location to refine clarity and cultural appropriateness.

Validity and Reliability

Content Validity: Ensured by subjecting both instruments to review by three university professors specializing in marketing and organizational behavior and two senior retail

managers to confirm that the items accurately measured the intended constructs within the Nigerian context. Reliability: Internal consistency was established using Cronbach's Alpha (α) during the pilot study. All sub-scales demonstrated acceptable reliability, with α values ranging from 0.82 (Tangibles) to 0.88 (Reliability) for the CSQ instrument, and 0.85 for the combined Training Inventory, well exceeding the threshold of 0.70.

Data Collection and Analysis

Data collection was conducted over a six-week period. Research assistants were trained on standardized interview protocols to minimize bias, particularly in assisting customers with the CSQ questionnaire.

Data were analyzed using the Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS, Version 28.0).

- **Descriptive Statistics:** Mean scores and standard deviations were used to profile the sample and determine the CSQ Gap for each SERVQUAL dimension.
- **Inferential Statistics**
 - **Pearson's Product-Moment Correlation (r):** Used to assess the strength and direction of the linear relationship between the total hours of each training type and the overall mean CSQ score.
 - **Multiple Regression Analysis:** Used to assess the predictive power of the three independent training variables (PKT, SST, SRT) on the five dependent SERVQUAL dimensions, while controlling for variables like employee experience and management support. The standard alpha level for statistical significance was set at $p < 0.05$.

Results

1. Descriptive Statistics and CSQ Gap Analysis

The analysis of customer perceptions (P) against expectations (E) for the five SERVQUAL dimensions revealed a distinct service quality deficit across the Nigerian retail sector, with all dimensions registering a negative gap score.

SERVQUAL Dimension	Customer Expectation (E) Mean (SD)	Customer Perception (P) Mean (SD)	Service Quality Gap (P - E)
Empathy	4.65 (0.35)	3.82 (0.61)	-0.83 (Largest Gap)
Responsiveness	4.71 (0.28)	3.95 (0.55)	-0.76
Assurance	4.58 (0.41)	3.98 (0.50)	-0.60
Reliability	4.60 (0.30)	4.05 (0.48)	-0.55
Tangibles	4.45 (0.49)	4.10 (0.60)	-0.35 (Smallest Gap)

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The results clearly indicate that the largest negative service gaps exist in the Empathy and Responsiveness dimensions. This validates the contextual problem that while physical facilities (Tangibles) are relatively acceptable, the quality of interpersonal service delivery and promptness is the greatest source of customer dissatisfaction.

Employee data showed that the average annual training time was 28.5 hours (SD=12.1), with 55% of this time allocated to Product Knowledge Training (PKT), 30% to Soft Skills

Training (SST), and only 15% to Service Recovery Training (SRT).

2. Correlation Analysis

Pearson's r correlation was used to determine the linear relationship between the three training types and the overall mean customer service quality (CSQ) score (calculated as the average of the five Perception scores).

Training Type	Correlation with Overall CSQ (r)	p-value	Result
Soft Skills Training (SST)	0.61	< 0.001	Strong Positive Correlation
Service Recovery Training (SRT)	0.39	< 0.01	Moderate Positive Correlation
Product Knowledge Training (PKT)	0.08	0.350	Weak/Non-Significant Correlation

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A strong, statistically significant positive correlation was observed between the hours of Soft Skills Training and the overall perceived CSQ score. This finding suggests that a greater investment in SST is directly associated with higher customer perception of service quality. The relationship for Service Recovery Training was moderate and significant, while Product Knowledge Training showed no significant relationship with the overall CSQ score.

3. Multiple Regression Analysis

Multiple regression analysis was conducted to determine the unique predictive power of the three training variables on the most critical CSQ dimensions (Empathy and Responsiveness), controlling for employee experience and management support.

Predicting Empathy

The model predicting Empathy was statistically significant, $F(5,139) = 18.25$, $p < 0.001$, explaining $R^2 = 39.6\%$ of the variance.

Predictor Variable	Standardized Coefficient (β)	t-value	p-value
Soft Skills Training (SST)	0.45	4.98	< 0.001
Service Recovery Training (SRT)	0.12	1.15	0.250
Product Knowledge Training (PKT)	-0.05	-0.52	0.604
Management Support (Control)	0.32	3.51	< 0.01

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SST ($\beta = 0.45$) emerged as the strongest and most significant predictor of Empathy. This highlights that training specifically focused on interpersonal skills, listening, and courtesy directly improves the customer's feeling of being cared for. Management support also played a critical, significant role.

Predicting Responsiveness

The model predicting Responsiveness was also highly significant, $F(5,139) = 11.55$, $p < 0.001$, explaining $R^2 = 29.3\%$ of the variance.

Predictor Variable	Standardized Coefficient (β)	t-value	p-value
Soft Skills Training (SST)	0.21	2.11	< 0.05
Service Recovery Training (SRT)	0.31	3.05	< 0.01
Product Knowledge Training (PKT)	0.09	0.88	0.380
Management Support (Control)	0.25	2.76	< 0.01

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SRT ($\beta = 0.31$) was the strongest significant predictor of Responsiveness. This suggests that the ability to provide prompt and helpful service is critically tied to an employee's training in empowerment and problem-solving, enabling them to act quickly rather than being constrained by bureaucratic procedures. SST also contributed significantly, though less strongly than SRT.

Discussion

Interpretation of Service Quality Gaps and Training Efficacy

The finding of large negative gaps in Empathy and Responsiveness confirms the prevailing perception of service deficiency in the Nigerian retail sector. Customers feel uncared for and experience slow, unhelpful service. This is not surprising given the historical context of retail and the cultural barriers to proactive, customer-centric service.

The correlation and regression results provide crucial evidence for strategic intervention

1. SST as the Primary Driver of Relational Quality:

The powerful predictive power of Soft Skills Training ($\beta = 0.45$) on the Empathy dimension suggests that the service failure in Nigeria is predominantly behavioral, not functional. Simply possessing product knowledge is insufficient; the success of the interaction is determined by *how* the knowledge is delivered—with courtesy, engagement, and genuine interest. For a high-context service culture, training in non-verbal communication, active listening, and conflict de-escalation is the highest-yielding investment for improving customer relations.

2. SRT as the Key to Operational Efficiency:

The finding that Service Recovery Training is the strongest predictor of Responsiveness highlights a structural issue: frontline employees are often unempowered to resolve problems. Promptness in the Nigerian retail environment is less about speed of transaction and more about the speed of problem resolution (Ezeh & Swart, 2020)^[4]. When employees are trained in recovery, they gain the confidence and procedural knowledge to take ownership of customer issues, thereby increasing the perception of a responsive service environment.

3. The Inadequacy of PKT Alone:

The non-significant correlation of Product Knowledge Training with overall CSQ suggests that retail managers in Nigeria may be over-investing in basic informational training at the expense of behavioral training. While product knowledge is foundational for Assurance, customers only value it when delivered empathetically and promptly. PKT should transition from a focus on *recall*

to a focus on application within various service scenarios.

Theoretical and Contextual Implications

The study supports the tenets of the Service Profit Chain in the Nigerian context, demonstrating that investing in the internal quality (employee competence through SST and SRT) directly translates to superior external value (higher CSQ perceptions).

Furthermore, the results suggest an important contextual recalibration of the SERVQUAL model in emerging economies. While global benchmarks may heavily weigh Reliability and Tangibles, the Nigerian customer appears to be most sensitive to dimensions reflecting the quality of human interaction (Empathy and Responsiveness). Training must therefore be strategically designed to target these culturally and operationally sensitive dimensions.

The significant role of the Management Support control variable emphasizes that training alone is a sterile exercise if not supported by an organizational culture that empowers employees. Training in service recovery, for example, is meaningless if store managers immediately override or punish the empowered actions of the staff.

Practical Recommendations for Nigerian Retailers

Based on the empirical findings, the following recommendations are crucial for Nigerian retail managers

1. **Shift Training Budget:** Reallocate the dominant portion of the training budget from one-off Product Knowledge sessions to continuous, mandatory **Soft Skills Training (SST)**. Training should use scenario-based role-playing to address common customer frustrations (e.g., power failure, out-of-stock items) in a culturally appropriate manner.
2. **Mandate Service Recovery Training (SRT):** SRT should be mandated and paired with **employee empowerment policies** that grant frontline staff defined authority limits (e.g., up to N5000 refund, on-the-spot discount) to resolve minor issues without managerial intervention, directly boosting Responsiveness.
3. **Integrate Training and Culture:** Management must champion the new service culture. The training evaluation must include a measure of behavioral transfer to the job, which requires managerial observation and positive reinforcement, addressing the significant predictive power of Management Support.

Limitations and Future Research

The primary limitation of this study is its cross-sectional design, which establishes correlation and prediction but does not definitively prove causation. Future research should employ a longitudinal, experimental design, implementing a specific SST and SRT intervention in a treatment group and measuring the subsequent change in CSQ over time.

Additionally, this study relied primarily on quantitative data. Future research could utilize qualitative methods (e.g., in-depth interviews with employees and customers) to gain a deeper, richer understanding of the cultural and organizational barriers that inhibit the application of trained behaviors in the Nigerian retail context.

Conclusion

This study conclusively demonstrates that employee training is a vital, high-leverage investment for enhancing Customer Service Quality in the intensely competitive Nigerian retail sector. While basic training is necessary, the true enhancement of perceived CSQ is driven by strategic, continuous focus on Soft Skills and Service Recovery training. These training modalities directly address the largest negative service gaps—Empathy and Responsiveness—by transforming frontline employees from indifferent transactional agents into empathetic, empowered problem-solvers. For Nigerian retail stores to achieve long-term customer loyalty and sustained competitive advantage, they must commit to a service training model that is not merely an operational checklist but a fundamental, strategic investment in the behavioral and relational competence of their people.

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