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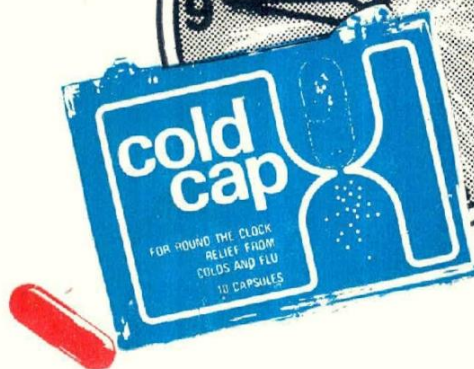
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## Customer Relation and Service in retail Pharmacy Practice

BY OLU OLAYINKA  
*Trumed Chemists Ltd. Ibadan*

Mr. Chairman, Ladies and Gentlemen, I feel exceedingly honoured by the invitation to deliver this address at this seminar. I should like to begin by disabusing the mind of anyone who might think that I have any greater competence than the next man to speak on this subject. For customer relations and service are a matter of common sense and most of you, if not all, here are better gifted with this uncommon substance than the poor trader addressing you.

The fortunes of a retail pharmacy depend a great deal on its image. A successful image is created by the right atmosphere within the organisation and by good customer relations. It is in the interest of the retail pharmacist to make his customers happy for only happy customers dig deeply into their pockets and thereby creating the buoyant turnover for the success of the business.

### Need For Management Techniques:

What retail pharmacists must realise is that although they are professional people they are also retailers. After all a sizeable percentage of their turnover comes from non-medical goods. A customer is either satisfied or not with the service and product received in the chemists shop. The need for the goods to be of the right type and the service to be efficient are therefore just as great for the pharmacist as with any other retail trader. The pharmacist himself must therefore possess sound management techniques. This is more so now that retailing is more than mere catering for the known wants of customers. At its best it promotes and creates new wants and new desires. It improves the standard of living and gives a wider distribution of the good

things of life. In the more advanced countries we find pharmacies selling gramophone records, magazines, photographic materials, cameras, toys, etc. Some in the United States now provide postal services. Back home here in Nigeria we find chemists now selling readymade children's dresses, shoes, table napkins, tooth picks and even rice and beans, articles previously restricted to the super-markets and departmental stores.

For a number of obvious reasons very many people come to the chemist shop in this country: inadequacy of medical facilities, delays in government hospitals before one can see the doctor, shortage of the prescribed drugs even when one is patient enough to see the doctor, the influence of advertisements, poverty limiting the number that can afford the fees of the private hospitals and because chemists in general give FREE advice. Although the retail pharmacist has these unique opportunities for having customers, even to the point of jealousy by people in other professions, customer relations and service are yet important and must be taken care of.

### Opening A Retail Pharmacy:

If the truth must be told the main object of opening one's own pharmacy like any other business is to make profits, but this does not mean that every retail pharmacist is a money-mad tyrant. In fact sometimes one does tasks which bring in no profit at all and sometimes which in themselves even result in losses in order to build up good-will among the customers and thereby stay in business. The ideal establishment is not looking for the once-and-for-all sale, making maximum profit from customers' lack of technical knowledge. In every case the retailer

has in each transaction an eye to the future. At the same time a successful retail pharmacist must keep at the back of his mind the overall financial arrangement of his business. If he is not in business for profit but because he likes dealing in drugs and selling to people he would soon be out of business for sooner or later he would run down his capital in paying staff wages, rent, electricity bills etc. The retail pharmacist therefore must strike a balance between satisfying the customer and making a profit.

### What Customers Expect:

Among the most important things expected by customers are convenient opening hours, good display, clear pricing, a quick and efficient service, pleasant, cheerful and helpful sales assistants, clean and comfortable atmosphere, and a wide variety of merchandise. It is practically axiomatic that in a retail pharmacy the staff must have a reasonably good product knowledge, for the purpose of helping customers who most invariably require guidance.

### Opening Hours:

It is common sense to open the shop at the most beneficial times. If a shop is located for instance in the commercial area of Gbagi in Ibadan it will be unreasonable to open on Sundays as such opening will provide service for hardly any customer. The majority of retail pharmacies in this country are located at residential areas and most of their business is done in the evening when workers are back home.

### Display:

The customers of today are quite different from those of yesterday. Life



## Customer Relation and Service in retail Pharmacy Practice

is much faster these days. The customers are in a hurry and so there is now a growing tendency for shops to offer self-selection or self-service methods of presentation with open counters. There should be enough room for free circulation of customers and sales assistants. Merchandise should be grouped by their type such as toiletries, baby goods and pharmaceuticals. Pharmaceuticals can further be grouped into their therapeutic uses such as Tonics, Antacids, Anti-malarials, etc. These various sections should be clearly labelled. Customers can thus be guided to the section which interests them instead of walking unnecessarily about the shop for service. This sectionalisation of items also helps the speed of service by sales assistants.

### Pilferage:

Pilferage is inevitable with open counters but it can be reduced to the barest minimum with good assistants. Loss through pilferage is estimated at about 0.5% of turnover. If in excess of this it is very likely that the assistants themselves are being clever. Dishonesty amongst sales assistants in a retail pharmacy is quite common and it is one problem to which no permanent solution has been found.

### Discovering Customers' Wants:

To have too much in stock of certain lines is to have capital tied up unnecessarily; to be out of stock is to lose opportunities to make profitable sales and build up goodwill while actually driving away would-be customers into the open arms of competitors. Here are some ways of discovering customers' wants:

(a) Analysis of sales over the previous year or two indicates roughly what quantities of each item were sold over a given period.

(b) Experiments should be made constantly by ordering small quantities of new lines which seem likely to sell well; if they sell well, they are retained. If they do not sell well, it means the customers do not want them and they are replaced by the next trial lines.

(c) Whenever sales assistants are asked for an article they do not have

they should note it in a 'wants' book which should always be kept handy at the counter. If this is maintained conscientiously, regular analysis of the 'wants' shows what lines can be sold in sufficient and steady quantities to make it worth while. Any wants recorded for lines already handled indicate that the articles were out of stock. If this occurs frequently it suggests that attention to the ordering system is required, either in timing or size of reorders, or in obtaining speedier service from the supplier. A 'wants' book should not be used, however, for merchandise requested only on special occasions unlikely to recur.

(d) Customers themselves are a good source of information about their wants. People like to be asked their opinion even when they are not directly concerned; they are more willing to help if it means better facilities for them. A further means of finding out customers' wants therefore is to ask the customers directly over the counter, but this can be done only with regular and friendly customers.

### Satisfaction of Customers' Needs:

No retailer can be all things to all people and the impossibility of satisfying every potential customer must be recognised at the outset. The wider the range of public catered for, the larger the capital to be invested in stocks and the greater the likelihood of slow-moving or redundant stocks. The narrower the range of merchandise the more restricted the bracket of customers. To try to cater for too broad a sector of the public results usually in failing to attract anyone. The bracket of customers to be catered for will depend largely on the location of the shop. Permit me to choose an extreme example: A chemist shop located at the Premier Hotel or Federal Palace Hotel is likely to cater for Tourists mostly. More than anything else there will be demand for cosmetics and drugs to take care of over-indulgence in food and alcohol. But certainly it is not a place to stock 'Gboromo' and preparations of like manner.

### Obtaining Supplies:

Having decided what stocks are

likely to be the wants of his customers the retailer has to consider the source of his supplies. It is usually risky to obtain all supplies from a single source, even if it were possible, as the retailer then is too dependent on one firm. On the other hand, it pays to be a good customer of a supplier because the retailer may then receive quantity discounts, and preferential treatment in times of shortage. Most retailers find it best to obtain most of their stock from two or three sources, the remaining lines coming from a few less important suppliers, each supplying goods for gaps in the retailer's planned stock, which cannot be filled by the main suppliers.

### Shop Assistants:

The part played by shop assistants in the relationship between customers and the establishment is very important. This is clearly revealed by the result of an analysis done by some experts on why customers quit. The analysis showed that:

- 1% Die
- 3% move away
- 5% make new friendship
- 9% for competitive reasons
- 14% due to product dissatisfaction
- 68% because of the attitude of indifference of some employees towards them.

Quite often customers are left waiting, whilst romance and gossip are being discussed, creating irritability and resentment in the minds of the customers. Worse still customers are often rudely told "we have only this" implying that if you do not want this you may go elsewhere. And of course the customers go to competitors. It is not in the interest of the retail pharmacist that this should happen. Therefore in picking his assistants he should be careful enough to select the best material. This does not necessarily mean selecting people already highly trained and highly paid. It means choosing from the most suitable people available, realising that one is very lucky indeed to get exactly what one wants. It means NOT choosing relations and

*Continued on Page 29*



## Customer Relation and Service in retail Pharmacy practice

*contd. from page 25*

friends who do not possess the skill for efficiency. The assistant must be smart, neat and reasonably good looking. They should be able to speak reasonably good English and the native language of the people where the shop is located. They must be polite and honest. They must be cheerful and sympathetic. They must be accurate even if not quick in arithmetic. Above all they must be willing to learn. Once engaged there is need to arouse and sustain their enthusiasm for the job as well as their friendship and respect for the pharmacist. They must be given a sound training in looking after the customers. Training builds up staff ego and confidence. Some people however take the view that training is not worth all the trouble.—“They only leave and somebody else gets the benefits.” With good staff management they do not just leave.

### Supervision:

To get the best out of shop assistants there must be constant supervision. This is not as easy to do properly as it sounds: badly performed supervision can very easily indeed cause bad feeling between the retailer and staff and can kill assistants' initiative. Worse still the assistants may even leave and somebody else gets the benefit of the training given to them.

Supervision on any particular task really consists of explaining clearly what is required and making sure the assistant understands; leaving her to do the job unwatched, subsequently checking that it has been done properly and complimenting the assistant on the way it has been done. Praise for a job well done goes a long way to get the assistant's cooperation for subsequent assignments. Each new task then becomes a challenge to the assistant. If not quite right, the assistant should be shown again the right way and given another chance at once to prove herself. It is pointless for the retailer to lose his temper because a mistake has been made. It is even worse to sack an assistant for committing trivial mistakes because changes in staff are usually expensive. It takes time before a new assistant can work at full efficiency because at first she is unaccustomed to what are stocked or where they are kept on the counters and

shelves. Besides there is the cost in time and trouble of interviewing, recruiting and training new hands. The total cost of staff turn-over can be very high and hence it is better to pay existing good staff an above-average wage to ensure that they continue to work well and remain in the establishment.

### Service:

It has been suggested that customers enter one shop on account of an innate preference and pass others on account of prejudice. Such inner feelings mostly emanate from previous experience, at first hand or otherwise. We can only suppose therefore that customers anticipate the continuance of such service, otherwise they would have no reason to return to the shop which has served them well.

Not all customers know exactly what they want when they enter a shop nor make their requirements completely clear. It is up to the staff to find out the full requirements and supply the right merchandise.

Customers having handled merchandise become more desirous of possessing it. Therefore assistants should encourage them to do so.

It is usual to suggest similar products to those requested but not in stock. But customers should not be pressed too hard.

An assistant sometimes has to deal with more than one customer at the same time; she must welcome the second customer by breaking into her sales talk and asking if she would be good enough to wait just a moment, or possibly a friendly glance or smile may even suffice to welcome the second customer. Customers do not like to feel neglected or unwanted when they enter a shop.

Customers should never be told that trade is bad. Not only do people like to shop where it seems that many others are gaining satisfaction, but many customers only ask to make conversation and want to hear a cheerful response.

From time to time customers may not be entirely satisfied; assistants must never show resentment nor feel that they have worked in vain. Customers who notice that assistants are cross for not making a purchase may never come to the shop again.

During a transaction it is common for a customer to raise objections. Such objections should be met truthfully. It helps to agree with a customer over an objection before going on with a “but.....”. Assistants should always wait until the full objection has been stated and never argue.

Customers must be made to feel that they can rely completely on the shop, on the staff, and the goods it offers. Therefore assistants must never promise more than the shop can do.

### Complaints:

Occasional complaints are inevitable; well handled they can build goodwill. A complaint is better than a lost customer. If for instance an article is returned because it is genuinely faulty the retailer should apologise and replace the article at once. If the customer is to blame a lot of tact is necessary to explain this. Even then if it is only a small amount that is involved the customer can be given a new article.

Not all complaints come to light. If it is noticed therefore that a good customer appears to have gone elsewhere a personal contact should be made by the manager. This brings the fault to light and may win the customer back even more firmly than previously.

### The Pharmacist's Health:

Good health is important to the pharmacist himself. He cannot afford to be away from the shop because of illness otherwise he loses his customers. He should take regular exercise and avoid unnecessary exertion in the shop such as lifting heavy objects etc. Above all he should have the right approach: trifles are not worth anxiety, and major problems are not solved by worry but by deciding what exactly the problems are, and finding solutions. His attitude to fellow pharmacists who are competitors should be reasonably friendly: there is always a living available for every one who knows his business. Success only comes from hard work, ever-improving efficiency and the realization that there is always much to learn.

Mr. Chairman, Ladies and Gentlemen I thank you for granting me this audience.