The Impact of the Customer Orientation of Call Center Employees on Customers' Affective Commitment and Loyalty

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This study investigated the potential benefits of employees' customer orientation to service providers. To achieve that aim, the author tested relationships between customer focus (creating value for customers) and customer feedback (seeking evaluations of work and quality) and perceived service quality and customers' affective commitment and loyalty to service firms. Mail survey data were collected from customers of two call centers in Australia. The samples consisted of end "consumers" of insurance services (n = 289) and business "customers" of a bank (n = 325). Two key findings emerged from the final structural model. First, customer focus was related to loyalty, with partial mediation by perceived service quality. Second, and in contrast, customer feedback exhibited a direct relationship only to affective commitment. The findings were highly consistent for the two samples and have implications for both managers and researchers.

Keywords: perceived customer orientation; service quality; affective commitment; customer loyalty; call centers

Customer orientation, as perceived by employees, is important to organizations because it contributes to profits both directly (Narver and Slater 1990) and through its role as a dimension of service climate (Schneider, White, and Paul 1998). However, the precise effects of customer orientation from a customer's perspective are less clear (Brady and Cronin 2001a). Similarly, in the past, commitment has been measured predominantly in employee studies, but recent interest in customer commitment and its contribution to service relationships is indicated by empirical work in both consumer (Bansal, Irving, and Taylor 2004; Donavan and Hocutt 2001; Fullerton 2003; Garbarino and Johnson 1999) and business services (Morgan and Hunt 1994; Wetzels, de Ruyter, and Lemmink 2000). This study extends previous work by testing the links between customers' perceptions of employees' customer orientation (hereafter referred to as "perceived customer orientation") and outcomes which include customer commitment.

In their work on service climate, Schneider, White, and Paul (1998) demonstrated a positive relationship between service climate and perceived service quality, while many researchers have found links between service quality and customers' self-reported loyalty (e.g., Butcher, Sparks, and O'Callaghan 2001; Ranaweera and Neely 2003). Hence, it seems likely that the effects of perceived customer orientation may operate through perceived service quality to loyalty.

Customer commitment and loyalty are attitudes that reflect attachment to a service provider and positive behaviors. Both constructs have been the subject of much

scholarly work and are now considered to be complex and multidimensional (Allen and Meyer 1990; Bansal, Irving, and Taylor 2004; Evanschitzky and Wunderlich 2006; Oliver 1999). Examination of the dimensions often indicates overlap between the constructs, especially with respect to affect and emotions. Therefore, this study discriminated between customer commitment and loyalty by defining and measuring them to capture affective and behavioral responses, respectively. Details of their conceptualization, along with that of the other variables, are provided after explaining the context of the study.

After-Sales Service From Call Centers

Call centers were chosen as the research site for this study because they are an increasingly important component of the service that firms offer customers. In many organizations, they provide the main (or the only) customer interface for after-sales and supplementary service, information, complaint resolution, reservations, and ticketing (Anton 2000; Whiting and Donthu 2006). Scholars suggest that service-based competition and the opportunity for high-volume, low-cost service delivery via telephone-related technology have resulted in the enormous worldwide growth in call center numbers in recent years (Anton 2000; Callaghan and Thompson 2002; Deery, Iverson, and Walsh 2002). Hence, managing customers' experiences of call center encounters is likely to have important implications for company success, but research on voice-to-voice encounters, particularly the customers' perspective, is very limited (Armistead et al. 2002; Burgers et al. 2000; Whiting and Donthu 2006).

As well as their growth and increased use in service delivery, call centers are of particular interest because they have the reputation of lacking customer orientation. Most previous call center research has focused on the nature of work (e.g., Houlihan 2002), issues of control and surveillance (e.g., Taylor et al. 2002), and employee responses (e.g., Deery, Iverson, and Walsh 2002). The research has found that managers emphasize efficiency goals and productivity targets at the expense of employee stress and turnover and customer service priorities (Singh 2000; Taylor et al. 2002). Questions about customers' perceptions of the customer orientation of call centers, service quality, and their affective and behavioral responses to the service provider therefore warrant attention.

In summary, this study investigated how the perceived customer orientation of call center employees relates to service quality and is translated into affective commitment and customer loyalty. Perceived customer orientation was represented by customer focus and customer feedback, as identified in previous call center research (Dean 2004b). Figure 1 shows the conceptual model

FIGURE 1
Conceptual Model Guiding the Study
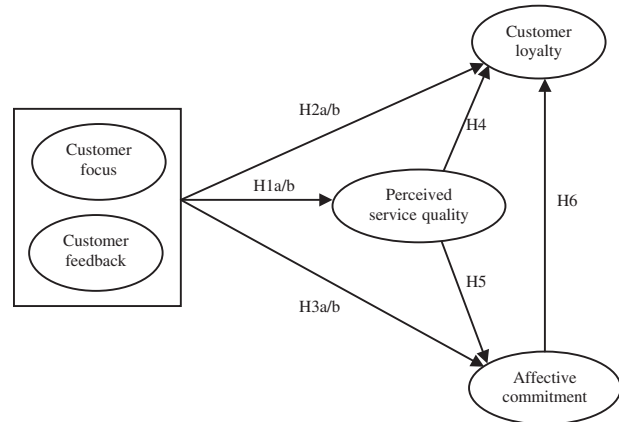
guiding the study. Next, each variable is discussed, and then hypotheses to support the model are described. Results, discussion, and managerial implications follow, and the article concludes with limitations of the study and possible directions for future research.

Conceptualization of Constructs

The findings of this study are based on individual information processing, which leads to feelings and attitudes. The attribution of three components to attitudes is widely accepted: cognitive, affective, and behavioral (Sánchez and Iniesta 2004). While not purporting to be exhaustive, the current study linked customer focus and customer feedback with variables that incorporated each of these components. Perceived service quality was based on customers' cognitive assessments of call center service, affective commitment was used to gauge their feelings, and loyalty measured their behavioral intentions. The variables are now discussed.

Perceived customer orientation was defined as the extent to which customers believed that the call center service provider was committed to understanding and meeting their needs and made an effort to seek their opinions and monitor their feelings (developed from Schneider, White, and Paul 1998). The definition arose from employee-perceived customer orientation in service climate studies and is consistent with market orientation studies, which emphasize the importance of acquiring and using information about customers (Brady and Cronin 2001a; Deshpandé and Farley 1998; Narver and Slater 1990; Webb, Webster, and Krepapa 2000). More recently, Voon's (2006) "proservice" construct incorporates customer focus, customer feedback, and evaluations of quality and after-sales service for perceived customer

orientation. This study adopted these dimensions but measured service quality separately.

Perceived service quality was defined as customers' assessments of the overall superiority of the service with respect to the service interactions and outcomes (developed from Brady and Cronin 2001b). In their synthesis of previous work, Brady and Cronin (2001b) established three dimensions of overall service quality: interaction, outcome, and environmental quality. Because of the telephony context of the present study, the physical environment was not included, but, consistent with Brady and Cronin's model, interaction quality was reflected by service consultant behavior, and the outcome dimension included waiting time.

Definitions of customer commitment draw extensively on organizational studies involving employee commitment (Bettencourt and Brown 1997; Bansal, Irving, and Taylor 2004; Fullerton 2003; Garbarino and Johnson 1999; Harrison-Walker 2001; Kelley and Davis 1994; Morgan and Hunt 1994). The current study used the same literature, defining commitment as "a psychological desire-based attachment to the service provider, reflected by the strength of the customer's identification and involvement with that provider" (developed from Porter et al. 1974, p. 604). Previous studies have identified psychological attachment as the basis of affective commitment (Bansal, Irving, and Taylor 2004; Fullerton 2003; Wetzels, de Ruyter, and Lemmink 2000), and the definition is consistent with both the "affective commitment" of employees used by Allen and Meyer (1990) and "commitment" used by marketing scholars for an attachment between parties (Garbarino and Johnson 1999; Morgan and Hunt 1994).

Early employee commitment studies had either a behavioral (Becker 1960) or attitudinal (Porter et al. 1974) emphasis. Later, Allen and Meyer (1990) showed that employee commitment consists of three distinct dimensions: affective, continuance, and normative. The development of customer commitment by marketing scholars also indicates that the construct is multidimensional (Gundlach, Achrol, and Mentzer 1995; Pritchard, Havitz, and Howard 1999), with debate still occurring about the appropriate number of dimensions (Sánchez and Iniesta 2004). However, authors agree that customer commitment should include affective, continuance, and normative dimensions (Bansal, Irving, and Taylor 2004; Fullerton 2005a; Gruen, Summers, and Acito 2000), now considered in turn.

Affective commitment as a form of "psychological attachment" is widely interpreted. For example, Bansal, Irving, and Taylor (2004) used it as *desire*-based attachment, while Gundlach, Achrol, and Mentzer (1995) defined psychological attachment to include the *behavioral intention* of remaining in a relationship. Wetzels, de Ruyter, and Lemmink (2000) explained the distinction by suggesting that customer commitment indicates a *motivation* to maintain a relationship, while loyalty captures the *intention* to maintain it. Consistent with Fullerton (2005a) and Harrison-Walker (2001), this distinction was adopted in this study, and affective commitment was defined as a positive feeling of attachment, which underlies behavioral intentions but is distinct from them.

Continuance or behavioral commitment emphasizes switching costs, or the difficulty in replacing a business partner, and is referred to as "high sacrifice" (Harrison-Walker 2001) or calculative commitment (Gundlach, Achrol, and Mentzer 1995; Wetzels, de Ruyter, and Lemmink 2000). Continuance commitment was not tested in the current study, because call center customers are frequently in after-sales situations, and the emphasis is on how customers *feel* and whether they *want* to remain with the service provider rather than whether they *need* to do so. Additionally, Evanschitzky et al. (2006) found that continuance commitment is a less enduring source of loyalty compared with affective commitment.

Normative commitment arises from expectations of employees in organizational studies (Allen and Meyer 1990). It reflects what customers feel they *should* do and can be defined as *obligation*-based attachment (Bansal, Irving, and Taylor 2004; Fullerton 2005a). Previous studies have shown that normative commitment is usually strongly correlated with affective commitment (Fullerton 2005a) and that its effects on loyalty are in the same direction but weaker (Gruen, Summers, and Acito 2000). Hence, normative commitment was not tested separately.

Customer loyalty is defined as "the degree to which a customer recommends, and expresses a preference for future use of, a particular company" (developed from Caruana 2002, p. 813). Thus, customer loyalty is similar to the "behavioral intentions (desire)" commitment dimension of Sánchez and Iniesta (2004), which was operationalized by items from Zeithaml, Berry, and Parasuraman's (1996) "preference" loyalty scale.

Customer loyalty has emerged from a simple measure of repeat patronage to a broadly interpreted and multidimensional construct (Dick and Basu 1994; Javalgi and Moberg 1997; Oliver 1999). Oliver (1999, p. 35) discussed customer loyalty in terms of a "cognitive-affective-conative-action" framework, recently used by Evanschitzky and Wunderlich (2006). Researchers in services suggest that loyalty should incorporate behavioral, attitudinal (affective), and cognitive elements (Caruana 2002; de Ruyter and Bloemer 1999). The current study measured neither cognitive loyalty, because customers' cognitive evaluations of performance were sought separately in perceived service quality, nor attitudinal loyalty, because customers' feelings were captured in affective commitment.

In summary, commitment and loyalty are distinguished in that affective commitment measures a psychological desire-based attachment, while loyalty seeks continuance intentions and likely future communication actions. The distinction is particularly important to this study because of the supplementary nature of call center services, meaning that many customers are already in relationships with the provider, and they may remain loyal for a period of time because they are constrained in service agreements rather than "dedicated" (Bendapudi and Berry 1997; Fullerton 2003). In such cases, affective commitment and customer loyalty provide different information about the effects that perceived customer orientation may bring forward.

Development of Hypotheses

Service climate studies have demonstrated that customer orientation (as perceived by employees), including both customer focus and customer feedback, is related to customers' perceptions of service quality (Schneider, White, and Paul 1998; Yoon, Beatty, and Suh 2001). Additionally, market orientation studies involving customers (e.g., Webb, Webster, and Krepapa 2000 in business-to-business banking and Voon 2006 in higher education) have found that customer focus and customer feedback are related to perceived service quality. Finally, specific market relationships suggest that seeking customer feedback will contribute to customer value (Slater and Narver 2000). Therefore, the following hypotheses were proposed:

Hypothesis 1a: Customer focus will be positively related to perceived service quality.
Hypothesis 1b: Customer feedback will be positively related to perceived service quality.

Customer orientation is one of three dimensions of market orientation (Kohli, Jaworski, and Kumar 1993; Lukas and Ferrell 2000), and a market orientation results in a customer-driven company, rewarded by customer loyalty and superior performance (Narver and Slater 1990). Schneider, White, and Paul (1998) stated that much of their service climate construct maps well onto market orientation, and thus, it was proposed that the common element, customer orientation, would be associated with customer loyalty. That is, if customers perceive that the organization providing the call center service is committed to creating value, encourages them to evaluate the service, and monitors their satisfaction, they will develop positive attitudes and intend to remain with the organization. Hence, the following hypotheses were proposed:

Hypothesis 2a: Customer focus will be positively related to customer loyalty.
Hypothesis 2b: Customer feedback will be positively related to customer loyalty.

Previous studies have found positive links between the customer orientation of service employees and customers' commitment and retention (Donavan and Hocutt 2001; Hennig-Thurau 2004; Jones, Busch, and Dacin 2003). In an organizational parallel, Allen and Meyer (1990) showed that work experiences that promoted feelings of comfort in employees predicted their affective commitment to an organization. Thus, the present study proposed that when call center customers identified positive customer focus, they would respond by feeling attachment to the provider and desire to maintain the relationship. Studies that have demonstrated that affective commitment can be built through responsive communications with customers (e.g., Morgan and Hunt 1994) suggest that such feelings will also be generated when the service provider makes an effort to seek customers' opinions and monitor their feelings. Hence, the following hypotheses were proposed:

Hypothesis 3a: Customer focus will be positively related to affective commitment.
Hypothesis 3b: Customer feedback will be positively related to affective commitment.

Empirical studies, in a variety of industry settings, provide compelling evidence for a direct relationship between service quality and customer loyalty, measured in terms of behavioral intentions (e.g., Cronin, Brady, and Hult 2000; Zeithaml, Berry, and Parasuraman 1996). Brady and Cronin (2001a) found that perceived customer orientation (measured by employee behaviors that resemble interaction quality in this study) was indirectly related to behavioral outcomes (customers' repurchase and recommendation intentions and their feelings of loyalty). Recent studies have reinforced the findings in retail banking (Caruana 2002), in veterinary services (Harrison-Walker 2001), and with telephone users (Ranaweera and Neely 2003). A relationship in call centers was also proposed:

Hypothesis 4: Perceived service quality will be positively related to customer loyalty.

Few studies appear to have tested the relationship between perceived service quality and affective commitment, although Fullerton (2005b) found a strong and positive link in clothing and grocery retailing. Other evidence arises from constructs that encapsulate elements of service quality (with respect to the service interaction and outcome)

and affective commitment. For example, evaluations of the consumption experience (Garbarino and Johnson 1999) and the customer-oriented behaviors of service workers (Donavan and Hocutt 2001) have been found to positively influence relationship commitment, and reliability and responsiveness have been shown to build affective commitment (Gruen, Summers, and Acito 2000). In a business call center study, de Ruyter and Wetzels (2000) suggested that service consultants' "attentiveness" resembled perceived service quality and resulted in positive customer feelings. Hence, Hypothesis 5 was proposed:

Hypothesis 5: Perceived service quality will be positively related to affective commitment.

Studies that consider customer commitment and loyalty as separate constructs within the same study have demonstrated that affective commitment leads to specific elements of loyalty, such as positive word of mouth, advocacy, and repurchase intentions. Examples are evident for airlines and hotels (Pritchard, Havitz, and Howard 1999), veterinary services and hair salons (Harrison-Walker 2001), retail service brands (Fullerton 2005a, 2005b), auto repair customers (Bansal, Irving, and Taylor 2004), and customers of a mass transit service (Evanschitzky et al. 2006). Similarly, Garbarino and Johnson (1999) showed that high relational repertory theater customers were driven by (affective) commitment, and in a business-to-business context, Morgan and Hunt (1994) found that relationship commitment was negatively related to propensity to leave. Overall, these studies show that when customers are psychologically attached to organizations, they are predisposed to maintain their relationships with the providers and to be positive in their communications. Thus:

Hypothesis 6: Affective commitment will be positively related to customer loyalty.

Mediation Effects

The conceptual model presented in Figure 1 implies mediating effects by perceived service quality and affective commitment, in the links between customer focus and customer feedback, with customer loyalty. These effects have some support in the extant literature. For example, studies involving perceived service quality indicate that there are sequences in which organizational and employee factors are linked to service quality and ultimately to customer loyalty (Storbacka, Strandvik, and Grönroos 1994; Heskett, Sasser, and Schlesinger 1997). That is, customers gauge the extent of customer focus

and the interest in their feedback, through employees' behaviors and the overall superiority of the service interaction (Brady and Cronin 2001b). Positive responses that lead to affective commitment are likely to be transmitted via perceived service quality. Furthermore, previous research suggests that affective commitment mediates the relationship between elements of perceived service quality and loyalty intentions for both end consumers (Garbarino and Johnson 1999; Fullerton 2005b) and business customers (Morgan and Hunt 1994).

Appropriate combinations of the main-effects hypotheses (Hypotheses 1 to 6) in Figure 1 were used to infer mediation. For example, to examine whether perceived service quality mediated the effect of customer focus on loyalty, three possible outcomes of the results pertaining to Hypotheses 1a, 2a, and 4 were used as follows. If Hypotheses 1a, 2a, and 4 were all supported, partial mediation occurred. If Hypotheses 1a and 4 were supported but Hypothesis 2a was not supported, full mediation existed. If Hypothesis 2a was supported and Hypothesis 1a and/or 4 was not supported, there was no mediation, and customer focus had a direct effect on loyalty.

METHOD

Sample

Two separate sets of call center customers constituted the sample: end consumers of insurance ($n = 289$) and business customers of online banking ($n = 325$). The two call centers were chosen because they are located at the opposite ends of Taylor et al.'s (2002) call center classification. They both receive only in-bound calls, but they differ in three main ways. First, the business call center is an "online help desk," and its primary purpose is to provide customer service without time constraints. Second, to access the help desk, business customers pay a monthly fee. For the insurance consumers, no extra fee is paid for call center services. Third, the business call center emphasizes service quality rather than managing predetermined quantities of calls. The two samples were kept separate because they represented distinctly different circumstances and enhanced the cross-validation and generalizability of the study (Cronin et al. 1997).

Forty-nine percent of the end consumers of the insurance company were male, most were aged 35 to 54 years (average age = 49.7 years), and nearly all were long-standing customers of the organization. Most (90%) of them contacted the call center for information about their contracts or bills, while only 10% called to complain. In contrast, more than two thirds (68%) of the respondents

who contacted the online banking call center (business customers) were women, and they were younger (average age = 42.0 years). They called for information (19%), assistance with the online banking facility (61%), or to make complaints (20%). More than half of these respondents worked in property and business services (20%), construction and related trade services (15%), and either retail or wholesale trade (23%).

Research Design

The unit of analysis in this study was the individual. To reach respondents, a cross-sectional mail survey design was used. A representative from the two call centers downloaded the names and addresses of random samples of customers who had recently used their call centers and provided mailing labels to the researcher. While a mail-out survey design was considered appropriate for the study, such a design has the disadvantage of a low response rate. Therefore, steps were taken to increase the response rate by ensuring clarity in the wording of the survey, avoiding undue length, including a letter from the organization to encourage participation, and providing a prepaid return envelope (Dillman 1991). However, the response rates (15% and 16% for the consumer and business samples, respectively) indicate that the results may be biased because of nonresponse error. Appropriate data to check representativeness were not available. Hence, the values attributed to variables by early (within the first 2 weeks) and late respondents were compared using t tests (Armstrong and Overton 1977). No significant differences between means were detected.

Measures

Measures for the variables were developed from the literature, and details of the final items constituting each scale are provided in Table 1. All items used a 7-point, Likert-type scale ranging from 1 (*strongly disagree*) to 7 (*strongly agree*), except for perceived service quality, which sought responses ranging from 1 (*very low quality*) to 7 (*very high quality*).

Perceived customer orientation was conceptualized in terms of customer focus and feedback. Thus, it was measured using items concerned with an organization's focus on understanding customers and activities to solicit their evaluations of its work and service. Nine items were used. The first six items were taken directly from the customer orientation scale developed by Narver and Slater (1990), and three extra items were included, two from Schneider, White, and Paul (1998) and one from Sin and Tse (2000).

Perceived service quality initially consisted of 10 items, 7 of which were taken from the scale of Burgers

et al. (2000) and concerned call center staff members. The other 3 items covered aspects of the core service outcome and the time consumed in a queue. During the analysis, the scale was refined, resulting in 7 items for the end consumer sample and 8 items for the business sample.

To measure customer loyalty, the five items of the customer loyalty preference scale developed and refined by Zeithaml, Berry, and Parasuraman (1996) and confirmed in subsequent studies (e.g., de Rutyer and Bloemer 1999) were adopted unchanged. The scale is consistent with other studies that have addressed customer preference and preparedness to recommend a firm (Butcher, Sparks, and O'Callaghan 2001; Caruana 2002; Zins 2001).

Consistent with previous service studies (Garbarino and Johnson 1999; Harrison-Walker 2001; Kelley and Davis 1994), affective commitment was measured by adapting the short Organizational Commitment Questionnaire of Mowday, Steers, and Porter (1979) to a measure suitable for customers. The scale captured identification with the company (pride in belonging), psychological attachment (sense of belonging), concern about the long-term success of the company, and feelings of loyalty. Two extra items, which emphasized the commitment of customers to relationships with a service provider, were included from White and Schneider (2000). During the analysis, the scale was refined from 10 to 5 items.

RESULTS

Refinement of the Scales and the Measurement Model

The two samples, end consumers and business customers, were analyzed separately, and each sample was used for scale refinement. The measures were initially tested using principal-components analysis, with oblique rotation. Factor loadings greater than .32 were interpreted (Tabachnick and Fidell 2001). As expected, five distinct variables were identified. However, five cross-loading items emerged from the analysis of the customer loyalty and affective commitment scales and were therefore deleted.

Construct validity was further established by confirmatory factor analyses, using LISREL 8.3 and the criteria provided by Hair et al. (1998) and Bagozzi and Yi (1988). The fit of the measurement model was determined in accordance with the recommendations of Jöreskog and Sörbom (1993). To ensure discriminant validity, different factor models were tested, including single-factor and five-factor models (Hinkin 1995). As expected, the best fitting measurement model had five distinct latent variables, with goodness-of-fit index (GFI) = .97, adjusted GFI (AGFI) = .92 and root mean square

TABLE 1
Factor Loadings and *t* Values for Items Used to Measure the Constructs

	Consumer Sample		Business Sample	
	Loading	t	*Loading*	t
Customer focus (Narver and Slater 1990)				
The XYZ organization				
1. Maintains a high level of commitment to me, as a customer	.88	18.48	.84	18.53
2. Constantly creates value for me	.81	16.28	.80	16.88
3. Understands my needs	.88	18.73	.90	20.65
4. Has the main objective of keeping me satisfied	.87	18.13	.90	20.41
Customer feedback (Narver and Slater 1990; Schneider, White, and Paul 1998; Sin and Tse 2000)				
The XYZ organization				
1. Regularly monitors my satisfaction level	.88	18.25	.96	20.31
2. Pays close attention to after-sales service	.91	19.35	.89	18.16
3. Encourages informal feedback regarding its services	.65	11.96	.80	19.65
4. Asks me to evaluate the quality of its work and service	.71	13.31	.78	18.57
Perceived service quality (Burgers et al. 2000)				
My assessment of the service quality of the call center in relation to				
1. Getting my problem solved or request answered	.87	18.25	.85	18.83
2. The time I had to spend waiting in a queue for service[a]	—	—	.54	10.32
3. The service consultant taking enough time and not rushing me	.85	17.51	.85	18.91
4. The service consultant assisting me to define my problem or question more specifically	.88	18.73	.88	19.50
5. The service consultant being able to solve different problems	.90	19.42	.89	20.21
6. The service consultant explaining steps in the process (or reasons for problems)	.88	18.35	.81	17.55
7. The service consultant treating me with empathy	.88	18.38	.84	18.32
8. The service consultant having the authority to solve my problem	.82	16.57	.87	19.52
Affective commitment (Mowday, Steers, and Porter 1979; White and Schneider 2000)				
1. I really care about the fate of this company	.88	18.72	.85	19.08
2. I feel a great deal of loyalty to this company	.93	20.81	.95	22.76
3. I am willing to put in effort to help this company be successful	.89	19.15	.91	20.98
4. I feel a sense of belonging to this company	.83	17.26	.90	20.86
5. My relationship with XYZ is very important to me	.86	18.29	.70	14.39
Customer loyalty (Zeithaml, Berry, and Parasuraman 1996)				
1. I am likely to say positive things about XYZ to other people	.91	20.04	.88	21.68
2. I would recommend XYZ to someone who seeks my advice	.96	22.12	.93	22.90
3. I would encourage friends and relatives to do business with XYZ	.99	23.25	.95	22.16
4. I consider XYZ my first choice to buy the appropriate services[a]	.84	17.77	—	—
5. I am likely to do more business with XYZ in the next few years	.76	15.34	.82	17.86

a. This item was deleted in one of the analyses because it did not meet the criterion of Anderson and Gerbing (1988) that the loading must be greater than twice the standard error.

error of approximation (RMSEA) = .04 for the consumer sample and GFI = .96, AGFI = .90, and RMSEA = .08 for the business sample. The items used for each variable, their factor loadings, and *t* values are shown in Table 1.

Properties and Intercorrelations of Variables

Table 2 shows the means and standard deviations of the five constructs for each sample. Table 2 also shows that the Cronbach's α values for scale reliability were acceptable (Nunnally and Bernstein 1994), and the average variance extracted met Bagozzi and Yi's (1988) criterion of greater than .50.

The intercorrelations in Table 2 indicate higher levels of association between measures in the consumer sample compared with the business sample, with all constructs strongly correlated. The strong correlations are of some concern because of possible conceptual and statistical issues that arise from multicollinearity (Tabachnick and Fidell 2001). Therefore, to ensure that variables were

TABLE 2
Means, Standard Deviations, α Values and Intercorrelations of Variables

Variables	M	SD	Number of Items	α	Average Variance Extracted	1	2	3	4
1. Customer focus	4.73	1.32	4	.92	.86				
	4.38	1.30		.91	.85				
2. Customer feedback	3.52	1.41	4	.88	.86	.64			
	2.73	1.32		.86	.81	.47			
3. Perceived service quality	5.14	1.31	7	.96	.87	.70	.50		
	5.06	1.19		.95	.82	.55	.35		
4. Customer loyalty	5.33	1.61	5	.96	.88	.69	.54	.69	
	4.40	1.49		.94	.87	.55	.41	.57	
5. Customer commitment	4.37	1.58	5	.94	.83	.59	.53	.57	.66
	3.56	1.48		.93	.88	.44	.49	.42	.73

NOTE: The consumer sample is the top number and the business sample is the bottom number. All correlations were significant at $p < .001$.

TABLE 3
Standardized Path Coefficients and t Values for the Best Fitting Structural Model

	Consumer Sample Standardized Path Coefficient	Business Sample t	Standardized Path Coefficient	t
Customer focus to PSQ	.75*	13.16	.61*	10.54
Customer feedback to PSQ	ns		ns	
Customer focus to CL	.36*	5.49	.21*	3.70
Customer feedback to CL	ns		ns	
Customer focus to CC	ns		ns	
Customer feedback to CC	.36*	5.71	.45*	7.91
PSQ to CL	.27*	3.97	.27*	4.96
PSQ to CC	.42*	6.88	.31*	5.66
CC to CL	.33*	6.49	.58*	11.17
R^2 (PSQ)	.57		.37	
R^2 (CL)	.71		.70	
R^2 (CC)	.49		.39	

NOTE: PSQ = perceived service quality; CL = customer loyalty; CC = customer commitment.
*$p < .001$.

discriminated from one another, Anderson and Gerbing's (1988) "unity test" for multicollinearity was used for the variables whose correlations exceeded .70 in the final structural model (two sets with correlations of .71 and .75). In each case, the difference in χ^2 value did not indicate better fit when the variables were represented by one construct, and hence, multicollinearity was not considered to be causing unstable parameter estimates.

The Structural Model and Hypothesis Testing

The final step of the analysis involved jointly estimating the structural and measurement models. The model in Figure 1 provided similar results for each sample and acceptable fit indices: AGFI = .95, nonnormed fit

index = .99, RMSEA = .04, and standardized root mean square residual = .02 for the consumer sample, and AGFI = .91, nonnormed fit index = .98, RMSEA = .08, and standardized root mean square residual = .03 for the business sample. Customer focus and customer feedback were allowed to correlate during the analysis, producing correlation coefficients of .71 and .54. Figure 2 shows the final model for both samples, and Table 3 provides the standardized path coefficients, their significance levels and t values, and the R^2 values for the structural equations.

Figure 2 and Table 3 show the differing results for the two variables used to measure aspects of perceived customer orientation. The first hypotheses proposed relationships between customer focus and customer feedback with each of perceived service quality (Hypotheses 1a

FIGURE 2
The Final Structural Model for Both Samples
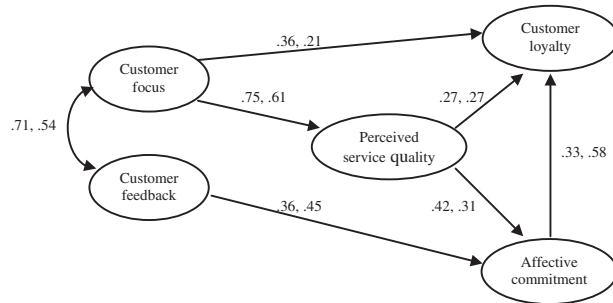
NOTE: Standardized path coefficients show the value for the consumer sample first, then the business sample. All values were significant at $p < .001$.

and 1b) and customer loyalty (Hypotheses 2a and 2b). Customer focus demonstrated a relationship with the dependent variable in each case, but customer feedback did not. In contrast, the proposed relationship between the factors and affective commitment (Hypotheses 3a and 3b) was supported for customer feedback but not for customer focus.

Hypotheses 4, 5, and 6 were supported for both samples. That is, perceived service quality was positively related to customer loyalty and affective commitment, and affective commitment was positively related to customer loyalty.

The findings for Hypotheses 1 to 6 imply differing mediation effects by perceived service quality of the relationships involving customer focus and customer feedback. In particular, Hypotheses 1a, 2a, and 4 were supported, suggesting partial mediation of the customer focus–loyalty link. In contrast, Hypotheses 1a and 5 were supported, but Hypothesis 3a was not. This implies full mediation by perceived service quality of the relationship between customer focus and affective commitment. Perceived service quality mediated neither the relationship between customer feedback and customer loyalty nor that between customer feedback and affective commitment, because Hypothesis 1b was not supported for either sample. Customer feedback had only a direct effect on affective commitment (Hypothesis 3b).

Similar logic, using the hypotheses, can be applied to interpret mediation by affective commitment. In particular, because Hypotheses 3b and 6 were supported but Hypothesis 2b was not, there appeared to be full mediation by affective commitment of the relationship between customer feedback and loyalty. Finally, support for Hypotheses 4, 5, and 6 implies partial mediation by affective commitment of the link between perceived service quality and customer loyalty.

DISCUSSION

By identifying the separate relationships of customer focus and customer feedback in call centers, this study contributes to a greater understanding of the specific benefits that perceived customer orientation may bring to organizations. Customer focus and customer feedback translate into affective commitment and customer loyalty in different ways.

Customer focus is directly related to customer loyalty, with some of the effect transmitted by perceived service quality. This means that customers use the quality of call center service interactions as an indicator of an organization's commitment to understanding and meeting their needs. In contrast, customer focus is not directly related to customers' psychological attachment (their affective commitment), but an indirect effect is shown via perceived service quality.

Customer feedback demonstrates different relationships to customer loyalty. It is directly linked with affective commitment, but not with perceived service quality, and only indirectly with customer loyalty. This is an intriguing finding given that significant bivariate correlation coefficients exist between customer feedback with each of perceived service quality and customer loyalty (Table 2). A possible explanation is that when customer feedback is allowed to covary with customer focus in the structural model, its effect is manifested via a greater sense of creating focus for customers. That is, when controlling for customer focus in the structural model, the association between customer feedback and perceived service quality becomes nonsignificant and is therefore interpreted as a confounding effect (Kline 2004). A similar explanation is assumed for the lack of a direct link between customer feedback and loyalty in the final model, despite quite strong bivariate correlations.

These findings about employees' perceived customer orientation partially support previous studies in which a market orientation, which includes gathering and disseminating customer feedback, was found to contribute directly to customer loyalty (Slater and Narver 1994). However, perhaps more importantly, they suggest that placing an emphasis on customer feedback is a means of bringing forward affective commitment.

The relationship between perceived service quality and customer loyalty in call centers supports the corresponding relationship that has been demonstrated for core services (e.g., Heskett, Sasser, and Schlesinger 1997; Zeithaml, Berry, and Parasuraman 1996) and suggests that after-sales services may have considerable strategic importance to the providing organization. The two samples also indicated positive relationships from perceived service quality to affective commitment, highlighting the role of

interactions with employees in developing customers' desire to maintain relationships, as well as their intentions to do so.

It seems likely that these findings in call centers may be applicable to other services that involve direct encounters with employees for either routine or problem-solving service situations, for example, in retail and professional services. These contexts provide an opportunity for customers to directly assess employees' customer focus and to surmise a firm's overall emphasis on customer orientation. The gathering of customer feedback over the telephone requires a deliberate and time-consuming commitment on the part of a firm and represents a more pronounced effort to monitor customers' feelings than simply making "your opinion" sheets available to customers. Hence, it is possible that the effects of customer feedback may not be as applicable as customer focus outside voice-to-voice encounters.

Managerial Implications

Call centers are frequently the only customer interface for personal contact in many organizations, and managers should have a keen interest in customers' responses to the service that such centers deliver. The findings of this study suggest that such interest is justified.

Customer focus is concerned with being committed to customers, understanding their needs, creating value, and having customer satisfaction as a primary objective. Questions arise about how to build an ethos that reflects these goals. This study highlights two major areas. First, the strong link to perceived service quality indicates that attention to achieving an outcome, via positive interaction with a service consultant, is important. Service consultants in call centers require special skills to identify customer problems, develop and explain solutions, and simultaneously demonstrate empathy in a telephony environment. To do so, they need training, practice, the authority to solve problems in a timely manner, and support from organizational processes and resources.

The second means by which customer focus might be conveyed concerns the call center environment. If, as noted in other studies (de Ruyter and Wetzels 2000; Singh 2000), call center managers continue to emphasize productivity rather than quality, high levels of perceived customer orientation are unlikely to follow. Efficiency-related performance models instigate frontline staff members to rush calls and do not give them scope to listen to customers' needs and to do the individual problem solving that is likely to enhance customer focus.

Customer feedback provides a direct pathway to affective commitment. Fullerton (2003) noted that while his study identified loyalty benefits of enhancing affective commitment, "it is less clear how affective commitment is developed and nurtured" (p. 342). This study identifies customer feedback as one means of doing so. That is, ensuring service employees seek customers' evaluations of the quality of work and service and monitor their satisfaction. Call center managers may do well to note Cronin's (2003) comment that the most important role of service managers is to get customers to complain. Customer complaints are well recognized as a source of quality improvement initiatives, and this study suggests that feedback on service is a mechanism to enhance customers' psychological attachment to the firm. Hence, managers should consider institutionalizing processes to gather and use customers' responses to service. Subsequent improvement initiatives are likely to contribute to ongoing customer orientation and set the scene for customer retention.

Finally, it is noteworthy that the standard deviations for the variables are quite high (Table 2), suggesting that there is considerable disagreement across customers in their experiences. These individual differences highlight the need for service businesses to actively manage variability in their customers, especially given that the two samples in the present study represented groups of customers all of whom were being served by the same call center.

Limitations of the Study and Future Research

This study generated consistent findings using two samples, representing different types of customers (end consumers and business customers), industries (insurance and banking), and call centers (high quantity emphasis vs. high quality emphasis). However, the results are subject to limited generalizability because of low mail-survey response rates and the possibility of common-method variance arising from the cross-sectional design. Common-method effects were likely to be reduced by using latent variable models (Harris and Schaubroeck 1990) and two independent samples (Hinkin 1995). Nevertheless, data from diverse customer samples using other types of call centers in other industries would help validate the results. Additionally, potential applications of the findings in other service contexts require testing.

The presumed causal ordering of variables is an untested assumption in cross-sectional designs (Cronin, Brady, and Hult 2000) and should be precluded (de Ruyter and Wetzels 2000). Hence, evidence of causal effects could not be inferred, and structural parameters are interpreted in terms of positive relationships between constructs. A longitudinal design would enable causality to be inferred. The causal order in which the variables are placed in the model provides another avenue for future research. For example, it is possible that perceived service quality may lead to perceptions of customer

focus; that is, customers make attributions about the customer orientation of employees on the basis of their experiences during service encounters, rather than the reverse.

"Omitted-variables bias" in the specification of a structural model can distort results (Jöreskog and Sörbom 1993) and may have occurred. The current model was not designed to specify all possible influences on affective commitment and customer loyalty but to investigate the effects that arise from perceived customer orientation. The R^2 values shown in Table 3 indicate that much of the variance in customer loyalty is explained but that more research is required to identify the antecedents of affective commitment. It would be useful for such future work to clarify the contexts and conditions under which those variables appear.

A distinct measure for affective commitment with acceptable psychometric properties was confirmed but requires more attention because its items were adapted predominantly from a measure of employee organizational commitment (Porter et al. 1974). As well, the refined measure included only one item about customers' commitment to a relationship. On the basis of this study and other recent studies (Bansal, Irving, and Taylor 2004; Fullerton 2005a), further work is necessary to elucidate the customer commitment construct and its measure.

The service quality scale was customized from Burgers et al.'s (2000) measure for service consultants in call centers and reduced during the refinement process. While it showed discriminant validity and good reliability, further investigation of call center service quality is important. For example, Zahorik, Rust, and Keiningham (2000) suggested that four components are necessary to judge customers' views of call centers: contact personnel, access, automated contact, and problem handling. The final scale did not include all these elements. Additionally, future studies may wish to investigate complaints processes in call centers, particularly the role of perceived service quality in service recovery and in developing customer relationships.

A difference between the consumer and business samples that was not explored in the present study was the fact that business respondents had to pay extra to gain access to the call center service. Other studies have shown that price, and the related concept of value, add complexity to models (Hartline and Jones 1996; Ranaweera and Neely 2003). Hence, future studies may wish to incorporate a variable to determine value in their models.

Finally, the customer orientation theory underlying the study is based largely on organizational studies and used only customer focus and customer feedback. Further investigations could identify and test more factors in both call centers and other services. Linkage research that uses data from both employees and customers would enhance this process (Dean 2004a) and

potentially provide further insights into the underlying mechanisms by which perceived customer orientation can create and enhance relationships built on affective commitment.

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