CUSTOMER SERVICE IN THE NAMIBIAN LOGISTICS INDUSTRY: BENCHMARKING FOR THE FUTURE

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Abstract

An efficient and effective logistics industry is essential if Namibia to achieve the objectives of its "Vision 2030" and "NDP_4" plans to stimulate growth through trade.   Logistics can support trade, but only if it achieves the appropriate service levels. Namibia plans to develop a thriving port-centric logistics cluster, however for this to succeed it is vital that Namibia's logistics industry delivers levels of customer service that match those required by international shippers and does so at a competitive price. This research used an exploratory approach through questionnaires and telephone interviews ~~to try~~ to gain a better understanding of those levels of service. The findings produced a preliminary view of the service levels offered by the logistics industry in Namibia. The results showed the service aspects that are of greatest importance to Namibian logistics users and indicated how well the industry is fulfilling them.

Keywords: Logistics, Namibia, Customer Service, Benchmarking, southern Africa.

Introduction

Logistics plays a fundamental role in increasing internationalisation of retail business as it helps companies to rationalise their supply chains, distribution infrastructure and to make more effective use of business resources (Bourlakis, 1998). Thus, an efficient and effective logistics industry is essential if Namibia is to achieve the objectives of its "Vision 2030", "NDP_4 " and the aspiration of becoming a gateway to southern Africa through the expansion of the Walvis Bay port to be the regional logistic cluster (Republic of Namibia, 2004). It is vital for the Namibian's logistics industry to deliver customers service levels corresponding to those required by international shippers and at a competitive price, to achieve her vision 2030 objectives.

Namibia needs to understand her market offering; the success of her vision is highly influenced by the service level offered by her logistics and transport sector both locally, regionally and internationally. The vision changes the whole aspect of the expectation of her logistics service providers requiring them to benchmark their offering against international standards. In order for Namibia to successfully compete in the global market she has to ensure that her service level can satisfactorily be benchmarked against global players.

Namibia has been ranked third amongst 10 countries in a new study designed to help large retailers determine where and how to best enter Sub-Saharan Africa's rapidly growing retail market (SAFLAND, 2014). It is worth noting that Namibia with its small manufacturing base leans more towards generating income through trade and service delivery.   With a retail market that is

dominated by South African retailers, this is a rare opportunity to position herself as a growing economy, by proving her competitiveness through delivering world class customers service.

The wholesale and retail industry is an important contributor to the Namibian economy as it accounts for roughly 15% of the country's total Gross National Product (GNP) and 33% of the entire services sector. It employs some 1.2 Million people, representing a significant 18% of the country's work force, which means roughly 2 of every ten (10) workers is employed in the retail industry (NWRA, 2014).

Retailers play a significant role in the economy of a country, as their performance is closely associated with measuring the economic vitality of the economy. Economists use retail sales to gauge economic performance, as retail sales reports use the timeliest data, it is considered to be a coincident indicator, as its activities reflect the current state of the economy and are also considered to be a vital pre-inflationary indicator (Barnes, 2014).

The above rationalize the concept of using the retail industry for the pilot study, as the performance of the retail industry vastly depends on the service levels they receive from the logistics Service Providers (LSPs). LSPs are not simply variants of transportation firms, they offer logistics services, of course, but they also enable retailers to leverage their networks of relationship in order to fulfil their customer's orders more effectively (Rabinovich and Knemeyer, 2006).

The management of logistics activities and LSPs relationships goes beyond just ensuring that the right products are delivered at the right time and place, rather it has shifted to include value adding activities. The driving force is no longer just cost and capital reduction when choosing LSP's. Today, there is a more strategic and long term focus to increase market coverage, improve service level or increase flexibility towards end customers (Skjoett-Larsen, 2000). The logistics activities performed by LSPs is much more than transportation it includes managing and operating of the transportation, distribution, information related services (tracking and tracing) and warehousing functions (Kee-hung, 2004).

According to (Ruske et al., 2010) new trade corridors between Asia and Africa, Asia and South America and within Asia will re-chart global supply chains. Trade volumes will shift towards emerging markets and least developed countries will take their first steps into the global marketplace. Logistics Service Providers play an important role in creating logistics performances within the supply chains; according to (Fabbe-Costes, 1997) they are the links that draw all logistics operations in a coherent picture. Logistics service providers, act as an interface between the logistics systems of both manufacturers and retailers. According to (Fabbe-Costes, 1997) by integrating logistical activities, retailers can improve their productivity and increase the reliability of shop replenishment. This paper is an on-going research work, contributing to previous research work in regard to the NGCL Namibian state of logistics project. It is aimed at identifying and understanding the customer service in the Namibian Logistics industry and how Namibia can benchmark her logistics services against global players and eventually managing a competitive logistics hub.

Literature review

In today's globalized world, supply chain management (SCM) is a key strategic factor for increasing effectiveness and the achievement of goals such as enhanced competitiveness and increased profitability. Most companies realize that, in order to evolve an efficient and effective supply chain, SCM needs to be assessed for its performance (Gunasekaran et al., 2001). This also applies at a national level, so it is no accident that Namibia's latest development plan (NDP_4), cites logistics as one of its four key economic imperatives in its quest for economic advancement (Namibian National Planning Commission, 2012). In order to finance development a country needs income. As Namibia is a developing country without a manufacturing base, it must acquire income, at least in the first instance, through trade (Lambourdiere et al., 2012). Trade and logistics have been inextricably linked for as long as man has had to move goods to or from a market. This was recognised by Converse (1954) who stated that logistics was "the other half of marketing", see fig 1. Converse understood that, whilst marketing activities such as advertising and promotion can stimulate trade through sales, this is pointless unless that demand can be satisfied. Further, that it is supply chain and logistics functions such as: warehousing, logistics information systems and transport that are responsible for satiating that requirement.

The objective of national development through wealth utilisation at a "macro level" belongs to government, but it has to be supported by the efforts of much smaller organisations and companies who in most cases are responsible for the trade that generates the wealth. At this "micro level" one has to consider the aims of these individual businesses. According to Drucker (1989) "There is only one valid definition of business purpose: to create a customer. It is the customer who determines
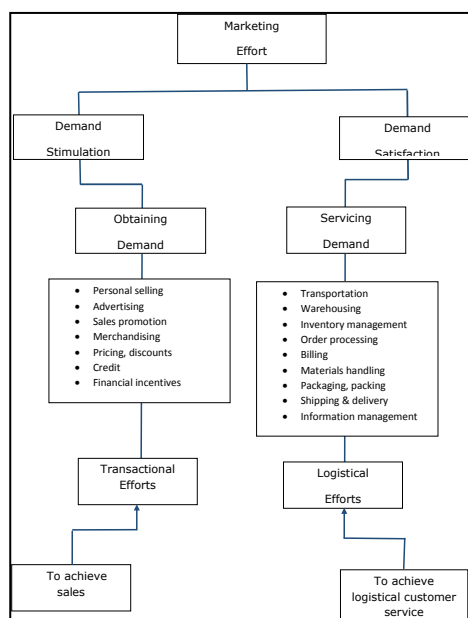

Figure 1: The two halves of the marketing process
Source: Converse, P., "The Other Half of Marketing", 1954, 26th Conference on
Distribution, Boston. M.A

what a business is. What it [the company] thinks it produces is not of first importance, especially not to the future of the business and to its success. What the customer thinks he is buying and considers 'value' is decisive; it determines what a business is, what it produces and whether it will prosper."

Therefore, it is vital to determine what the customer wants to 'buy' and, having done so, to provide it. Provision alone however, is not enough; rather it is essential to identify and provide the "correct level" of customer service that will generate competitive advantage, without endangering the sustainability, or future profitability, of the company. This has long been recognised by logisticians; for example, Christopher (1998) points out that "Logistics is ultimately concerned with customer service and specifically with making the product available in the marketplace within defined cost and service parameters". More recently, the same author (Christopher, 2012) maintains that "Ultimately the success or failure of a business will be determined by the level of customer value that it delivers in its chosen markets". Customer value can be understood to be described as:

$$\text{Customer value} = \frac{\text{Quality x Service}}{\text{Cost x Time}}$$

This equation (Johansson et al., 1993) is another illustration of the link between logistics and customer value as the former can affect both the "top" and the "bottom" half of the calculation. Once the importance of customer service is understood and is accepted, it becomes imperative to define and understand the concept. This would appear to be straight forward, but there are many meanings of customer service, for example (Lalonde, 1976), identified 26 different definitions. Clearly this could be confusing, especially if there are any apparent contradictions. Therefore, it is important to determine what is the best one (or ones) to use in any given circumstances; in this case what is most likely to suit the Namibian situation?

Modern theory suggests that it is supply chains that compete rather than products (Christopher and Towill, 2001). This is particularly true in the fast moving consumer goods (FMCG) sector where, because there is fierce competition amongst different FMCG companies, it has become imperative to turn retailers into advocates of the brand so as to have a competitive edge (Abid and Ali, 2014). These authors (2014) suggest that a key to achieving this is the use of efficient consumer response (ECR), which is one of the supply chain ideas developed to address the demands of shippers and customers. Some of these concepts, such as postponement or just in time (JIT), have obvious roles in improving the service supplied to the final customer. Other influences, such as increasing globalization would seem to make service provision more difficult. As well as responding to needs, these trends can become the "drivers" of supply chains. Globalization, arguably one of the most influential trends, brings benefits to customers by increasing the range of goods available and should achieve cost reductions as suppliers source from low-cost foreign countries. Bygballe et al. (2012) dispute this however, claiming that there is a lack of evidence that sourcing internationally actually leads to improved economic performance because of the difficulty in achieving a trade-off balance between purchasing and logistics costs (the total cost of ownership (Savage and Griffiths, 2007)) and customer service. It cannot be disputed that globalization implies ever increasing supply chain length, usually with a greater number of nodes. As supply chains increase in length, there are more opportunities for disruption and the risks increase as the probability multiplier effect comes into play because of the number of nodes. In some cases this can lead to manifestations of the "bull-whip" or "Houlihan" effect (Potter and Disney, 2006) where demand amplification can cause chaos in stock levels and manufacturing runs. The immediate impact of this is on the producer, but as soon as there is a risk of stock out or rationing, customer service will also suffer. This means that for supply chains to compete effectively by delivering good serviceability, there must be an high degree of

integration supported by sophisticated IT systems. According to Zhao et al. (2008), effective integration also requires relationship and commitment between organizations, e.g. through partnerships, which may change the balance of power in the chains.

As can be seen from the above, the factors that influence supply chains and therefore the customer service that they provide are numerous and complex. This reinforces the need to determine which factors are relevant in order to focus any study. According to Ruske et al. (2010) new trade corridors between Asia and Africa, Asia and South America and within Asia will re-chart global supply chains. Trade volumes will shift towards emerging markets and the least developed countries will take their first steps into the global marketplace. Namibia to wants to exploit this by becoming a gateway to southern Africa through converting the Walvis Bay area into a port-centric regional logistic cluster and realizing the objectives of its "Vision 2030" (Republic of Namibia, 2004). To do so successfully, she has to compete in the global market by ensuring that her service levels reach international standards and match or better those offered by other southern African hubs.

This aspiration clearly indicates that any customer service measurement must recognise the needs of global supply chain actors. It must also encompass the requirements of the retailers who are the other major driver of change and hold ever increasing power in supply chains compared to manufacturers because they are able to define and insist on the service levels to be achieved (Fernie, 1994, Birtwistle et al., 2003). Thus the focus of this paper is on the requirements of the retailers that may use the services of the mooted cluster. Its purpose is to determine the levels of service that they expect and to compare these with those offered by their logistics service providers. In turn this will be used to make comparisons with internationally expected standards and potential shippers' requirements since these, together with the shipping companies, are the "decision makers".

As noted earlier, although the primary aim of the port development is to enhance Namibia's future wealth and development, much of the success or failure at an operational level will be determined by the performance of individual organisations. This means that the measurement should be on a business to business (B2B) basis, which again supports the concept of working with the retailers in the first instance. It is also important to offer service providers, both businesses and government controlled, a mechanism to improve their performance going forward. A good method of doing this is to develop a set of metrics based on key performance indicators (KPIs) (Hanman, 1997) and Terry, 2012) that can be used for competitive benchmarking with local and international rivals (Cuthbertson and Piotrowicz, 2008). Therefore, the output from this project should be used to develop a framework for measuring the strategic, tactical and operational level performance in a supply chain as proposed by (Gunasekaran et al., 2001). It also provides a prototype list of key performance metrics aligned to achieving customer satisfaction.

Methodology

This research gathered preliminary information to establish retailers' customer service expectations compared to the service levels delivered. This was deemed to be the best approach due to the limited published information on Namibian Logistics and retail industry and time frames. Data was collected by means of online questionnaires and semi-structured interviews to supplement that obtained in earlier rounds of research based on interviews, workshops and questionnaires.

The retailers were purposefully sampled to ensure coverage of the full spectrum of retail operation. The selected firms were approached by telephone to obtain the contact details of a person responsible for procurement; a total of 37 retailers were identified in this fashion. Each of the persons responsible for procurement in these companies was then contacted by telephone to determine if they were willing to participate in the study, but only 23 agreed to participate. From these nine usable questionnaires were received representing a response rate of 39 percent.

The questionnaire variables were derived from brainstorming based on the set of metrics on the key performance indicators (KPIs), aligned to achieving customer satisfaction as suggested by (Hanman, 1997) and (Terry, 2012), and the consumer service attributes found in (Savage and Bamford, 1998)

To understand the current levels of customer service within the Namibian retail industry, the online based questionnaire was administered focusing on answering the following research questions;

1. What are the key customer service attributes that are valued by the retailers?

2. What level of service do they feel they receive from those attributes?

3. What levels of service do the logistics service providers believe they offer?

The concept was to compare the answers to the above questions to establish the preliminary view of the logistics customer service in Namibia. Due to limitations imposed by the replies to the first two questions as well as the generally low response rate, it was not possible to address the third question with any confidence at this time. It has therefore been deferred until additional data has been captured. The semi-structured interviews, comments, feedback from previous interviews, workshop and data gathered from question 1 and 2 above were compared and compiled to obtain preliminary view of the Namibian logistics industry's customer service. The research gives a preliminary, nuanced view of these service levels and to propose strategies to ensure that her service level can satisfactorily be benchmarked against global players.

This paper describes the latest phase in the NGCL's research project's programme aimed at understanding the current condition of Namibian Logistics, its potential for improvement as well as its possible impact on trade and national development. Previous stages of the project have successively endeavoured to understand: the current state of Namibian logistics, the generic requirements for successful hub development in emerging economies, the re-engineering requirements for Namibian logistics, whether Walvis-bay can evolve into a port-centric logistics cluster, the potential impact of a successful hub on Namibia's national development and the stakeholders' views on the probability of such a development. Figure 2 illustrates the overall programme of this research to date and illustrates the position of this component and report within it.

As Christopher (2012) suggests, "ultimately the success or failure of a business will be determined by the level of customer value that it delivers in its chosen markets", it is apparent that customer service has an influence on all of these areas. Therefore, measuring the service
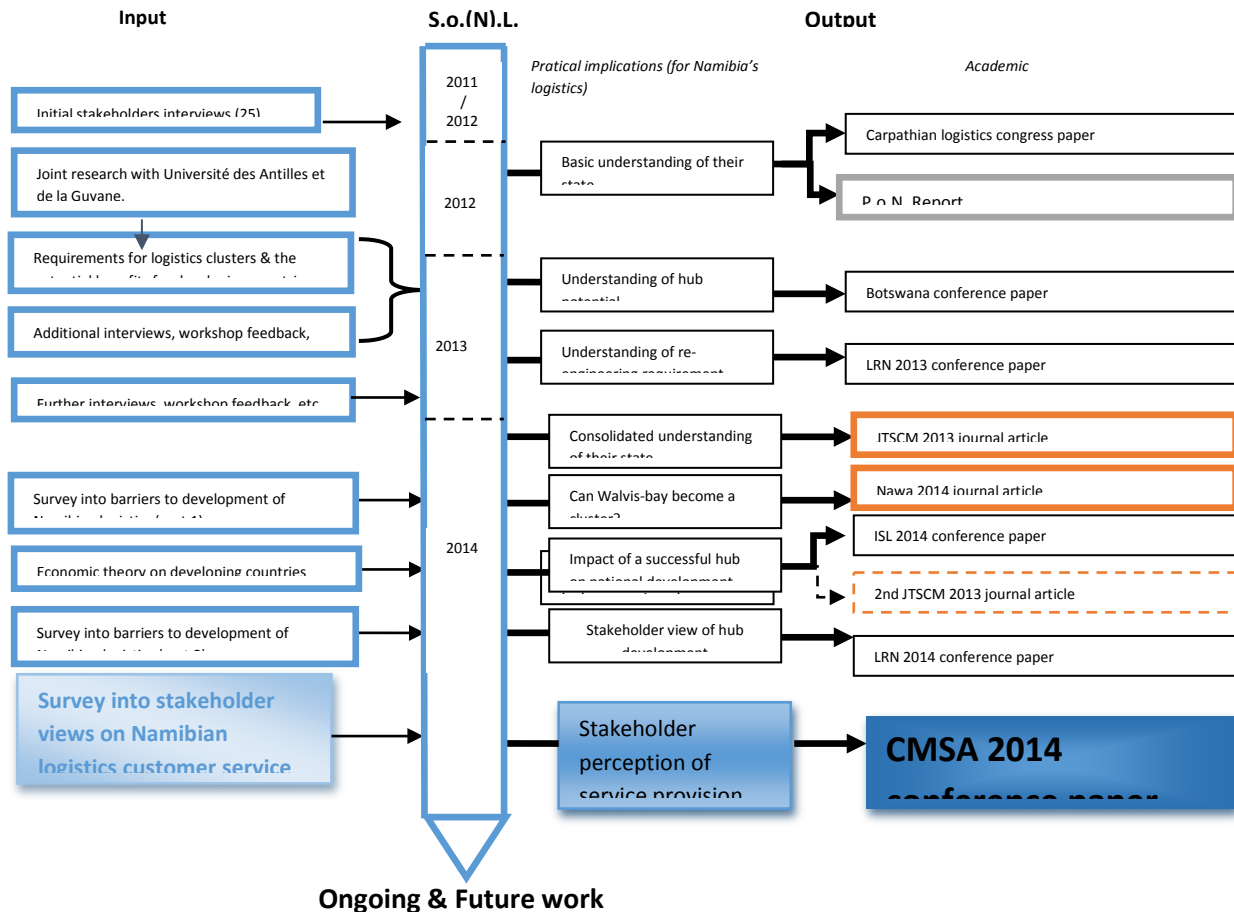

Figure 2 Overall project programme showing the position of this research component within it

Levels expected and offered is a way of assessing the potential success of the Namibian logistics sector's aspirations.

Findings

Like most countries, Namibia's logistics operations are affected by geography and history. The issue of influence from South Africa as raised by earlier research (Savage, Jenkins et al, 2013) is reaffirmed by this work. The methodology and literature defined the selection of a sample of retailers for this research and telephone discussions with them have indicated that their organisations are franchises or extensions of mother companies in South Africa. A general statement was "it is controlled in South Africa" or "we depend what they (SA) send us". The lack of control and decision making over the delivery of products and services by some of the retailers in Namibia are evident, as is the general "push" of inventory from the R.S.A. rather than its "pull" from Namibia. This limits the control available to Namibian companies' inventory mangers and therefore could be felt to reduce the influence of the service providers on some service factors. In turn, this might limit the

effectiveness of the project's ability to provide a view of the industry's performance. On the positive side, some respondents that indicated they used a mixture of supply and transport options; i.e. in-house and third parties which provides a basis for the research.

The retailers targeted in this research were asked to categorise themselves by selecting from a list of 14 sectors that they operate in: - Food, Non-Food, Electrical Appliances, and Clothing etc. Many have indicated that they operate within multiple sectors. This may have led to service factors selected as important to be similar for many retailers. There were some variations both across and within retail sectors, the preliminary ranking for service factors seen as important by retailers in Namibia are illustrated by table 1.

As mentioned above, some of the factors selected were found to be similar across the majority of retail sectors, while others do seem to have a greater priority for specific organisations. The low number of useful responses may account for the equal rankings for many of the factors and has restricted the sensitivity of the data and any conclusions drawn. Nevertheless, as this work is still part of on-going research and it does provide a preliminary indication of a retailer's service expectations from the Namibian logistics and transport industry.

Service Factor	Ranking
Delivery time	1
Conditions of delivered goods	1
Product Quality	3
Product availability	3
Cost (Handling and Delivery)	5
Packaging	6
Reliability of planned deliveries	6
Invoicing accuracy and procedures	8
Service level agreements	8
Type of product	10
Flexible supply options	10
Tracking status information	10
Service support during and after	10
Returns procedures	10
Order fulfilment	10
Supply Relationships	-
Back order facilities	-
Order procedures	-
Insurance	-
Payment terms	-

Table 1: The ranking of service factors selected by the Namibian retailers sampled.

Taking into consideration the aspirations for Namibia to become the regional gateway to SADC, there could be a concern that factors such as supply relationships and insurance, which are

perceived as vital for globalised trading (Möller and Halinen, 1999), have not been selected. The results also showed that factors like tracking and after sales service are not ranked as high as one would expect. These factors are seen to be adding value to customer product and service delivery (Christopher, 2011) and cannot be left out of operations if international levels of service would like to be reached.

There was an apparent tendency by the sample of respondents to prefer factors related to product delivery time and conditions. Most people ranked these factors performance by the logistics industry or suppliers from fair to excellent. There is concern that the perceived satisfaction with these factors might relate to low expectations rather than achievement of excellence. These may show that service level provided by retailer for their customers is (local) demand driven and so as long their demands remain low and the standard is on a par with the competitors, no further effort is needed. This would mean that, if local standards are lower than international ones, the service providers may not be able to meet global expectations if and when the opportunity arises. Clearly more data is required to enable the position to be accurately assessed and for reliable conclusions to be drawn.

Ratings of service levels, were seen to be positive, with very few respondents scoring below fair in a Likert range of excellent to very poor, with the exception of product availability that was seen by a few as poor. This could be the result of a "protest vote" against the "pushing of inventory" from the R.S.A. Further, whether this rating is related to a specific retail sector or based on the performance of suppliers needs further investigation. There were ratings that showed some service level factors as excellent and the majority were rated as good to very good. Some ratings varied along the scale and so must be interpreted as inconclusive at the moment and in need of further investigation. Others, however, were much more consistent and appear to give a clearer indication of the level of service. Figure 3 gives the recorded service level rankings and illustrates the need to gather additional data in order to provide unambiguous ratings of the industry's service levels.
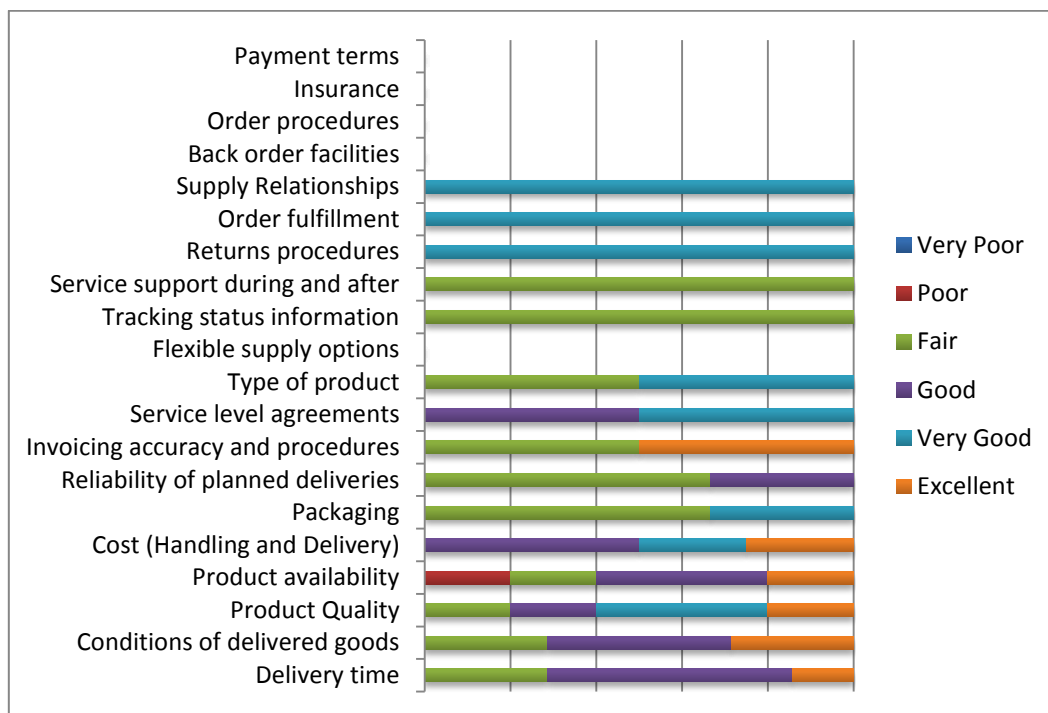

Figure 1 Recorded ratings of service factors

Limitations

As explained under the methodology section, this paper is the result of ongoing research into the state of logistics and its barriers in Namibia. The component of this earlier research that identified the barriers to logistics development in Namibia highlighted the lack of customer service as a key issue. This motivated the research into the service demands and delivery levels of the logistics industry. As with any research, this has limitations that included the small number of responses, which means that it is impossible be sure how accurate the retailers' view of the logistics industry obtained is.

The inconclusive rankings caused a further limitation as they prevented any reliable comparison of service provision to retailer requirements or international standards. The results lean towards factors associated with product delivery and availability. The question is how does this compare with international requirements, and can the Namibia logistics and transport industry deal with different service needs? Further research designed to gather more data and achieve a better response rate will aim to evaluate these questions.

The state of logistics research results had concomitant effects on the understanding the readiness of Namibia to become the regional gateway for the SADC region through the port of Walvis-Bay. The readiness and ability of the logistics and transport industry to provide the international service levels that will be expected from it needs to be established. This research has received a useful, if incomplete and inconclusive view of retailers' perception of the service levels provided the industry. This seems to be positive, but even if realistic, is one side of the equation; comparing this with the logistics and transport service provider perceptions and abilities is necessary and should form the next step of the research programme.

CONCLUSIONS

SERVICE FACTORS' IMPORTANCE

This research has provided a springboard to understanding the service level requirements expected by retailers from the logistics and transport industry. The emphasis from the respondents on the factors related to product availability, delivery and quality that all form part of the "logistics definition" suggests that Namibia may recognise its importance. Earlier research by Savage, Jenkins et al., (2013) used a varied stakeholder list to produce a view of the importance of logistics to Namibia. This research is another confirmation from a specific sector, namely retail, that adds to the foundation of the importance for logistics to Namibia.

Lambert and Harrington, (1990) have emphasised that, customer service shapes both buyers' perception and suppliers' offering. Establishing a customer service strategy needs an understanding of customer's requirements related to various products and services. Interpretation of the results from the majority of respondents provides a preliminary or prototype understanding. The rankings show that delivery time and conditions of goods are perceived as the most important factors. This could be interpreted as showing that customer requirements are more inclined towards product availability and quality. An alternative interpretation could be that, within a country that has long haul distances and infrastructure limitations, ensuring good quality products are delivered in time, every time, avoids high cost and onward service implications. The identification of these factors by

retailers suggests that recognising and specifying such service requirements form part of their business strategy. More research into retailer strategies is required, but the initial results show that for some of the retailers the aim to satisfy customer demands influences supplier and service provider selection. It suggests that they are likely to select those that can deliver on time and provide good quality products. This may be a good start for a business but, without the addition of other factors that add value to customers, it could be short lived and may not enable them to match international customer requirements. Focusing on product delivery rather than a competing supply chain strategy could lead to Namibia losing out on the established sectors internationally. The example of the Namibian livestock sector that has been ousted as a supplier to South Africa by South American suppliers because of stringent import requirements (Schlecter, 2014). This gives an understanding of the competition that could be faced internationally. Losing out to international suppliers or competitors like these does not bode well for the envisioned gateway to SADC because any potential cluster must be supported by global standard product and service delivery.

Namibia lacks manufacturing and theory states that increasing trade is the way to ensure wealth and development for emerging economies. The aim of the gateway through the port should be to attract trade to international businesses into or though Namibia. Namibian retailers will drive the domestic side of the operation and are therefore in a position to assess logistics customer service and performance. If this is found to be lacking, the reasons have to be identified and dealt with to ensure that they do not form barriers to successful development. One way of measuring the performance is through benchmarking of companies with local and international standards as well as with their local competitors. The framework for this should be based on an understanding of the operational requirements of Namibian retailers and how the logistics and transport industry affects them. This research has laid the foundation for this framework and should provide future performance metrics that can measure customer service satisfaction in Namibia.

FUTURE WORK

This paper is based on preliminary findings from a survey directed at retailers. The work is on-going and the priority at this stage is to extend the survey and convene focus groups to increase the sample size and provide a better view on the factors required and the industry's ability to service them. The data collected during this extension must ensure that the original third question can be undertaken with a reasonable chance of success. In addition the output from this will confirm or refute the emphasis on product delivery, availability and quality among retailers. A focused and follow-up data collection stage would be required in the form of a semi-structured questionnaires and interviews to stakeholders to gain quantitative or measurable data of the logistics and transport industry. There may also be scope to understand the reluctance to selecting value adding factors like insurance, supplier relationships, backorder procedures, tracking status, flexible supply and payment options. Questions could be directed to understand any lack of service or product delivery or limitations of the options offered by the industry. Obtaining the views from the logistics and transport industry as well as the services they can offer can help build up the overall picture and sharpen the focus of this research. Part of this should be to provide a mechanism, and possibly a service, for competitive benchmarking possibly using trade-off analysis techniques. If successful, this could give the members of the industry not only the opportunity to assess themselves against local and international competition, but also illustrate the key factors to address any deficiencies identified.

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