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Service: A Tool for Economic Development

It may appear strange to focus on service at a time when the nation is grappling with secession of territory to the Islamic caliphate of Boko Haram, a widening spread of the Ebola epidemic and unprecedented political shenanigans in the run-up to elections. However, it is my view that as each day unfolds with its own trouble, today is the best time to discuss service delivery and its linkage to economic development. The delivery of good personal service is not a function of economic, social or political challenges. It is a reflection of the value that we place on human interactions. I posit that service can be a tool for improving living standards and deepening international trade, which consequently hasten economic development.

When one speaks of service quality, many people are inclined to immediately think about product service and most probably recall times that telephone network service quality was abysmal or other times when payment platforms such as POS have caused them some embarrassment. The discussion today will focus on personal service, which each of us has full control over and not product service, which may be dependent on factors such as technology. Every one of us gives and receives some level of service daily. We encounter at least one person and our interaction, whether verbal or non-verbal, creates a pattern of emotions which trigger reactions. Retailers in more developed countries have studied this interaction and reaction and found that service quality is extremely important and has a direct impact on the bottom line of their businesses.

In the first stanza of our national anthem, there are two rallying calls within the four lines for Nigerians to serve. We are called to serve with love, strength and faith and again to serve with heart and might. Likewise, the national pledge in its third line calls us to serve Nigeria with all our strength. Despite the emphasis on service and the importance of it, many of us are guilty of giving and accepting poor service. Many people no longer have any expectation of getting good service. We are impolite to one another and trivialize impoliteness with the demons of local parlance 'no vex', 'manage am' and 'e no matter'. 'Please' and 'thank you' have become estranged from our vocabulary and where they exist, they are delivered with poor attitude and body language.

Poor service is deeply rooted in our mentality. Many of us are loud, often argumentative, rude, quick to fight and ostentatious. We look down on others and assess people based on appearance before serving them. We keep choice seats for the wealthy, celebrate mediocrity and sing the praises of thieves. We believe that respect is one-directional i.e. from the lowly to the rich or from the young to the elderly. We associate being loud and rude with being in charge and see power as a tool for oppression rather than service. We seek the shortest route to achieve our objective and often blatantly jump queues



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and process, as well as, engage in illegal activities cause we think we are smarter than others. We fail to set good examples for our children and staff and therefore perpetuate a downward spiral of poor community behavior and bad service.

In social interactions, it is common to pay a retailer and he/she has no change and will make no effort to find it. Many frontline officers do not know how to greet customers who approach them. Sales staff wear a scowl on their faces and often speak carelessly to prospective customers. Hairdressers and barbers 'gist' loudly over their customers heads and often watch television while delivering service. Many private sector firms have not bothered to address the issue of customer service as they do not care or cannot make the connection between service and revenues. Policemen are abusive and often threaten to shoot citizens because they carry guns. Mothers are abusive to their

children and often curse their nannies. The list of woes goes on.

In the public sector, institutions that have the responsibility for improving service delivery hardly make any impact. Servicom banners draping government offices do not carry any telephone numbers and provide a 'yahoo' email address for complaints to be forwarded. My research revealed that Servicom has a ten-day timeline to respond to complaints and this has helped me to understand why service is so poor: the ombudsman knows little or nothing about the benefit of quick resolution and how can we expect staff at parastatals and agencies to behave any better. The Consumer Protection Agency appears overwhelmed and therefore restricts itself to resolving fraud and more complex aspects of consumer protection without an adequate focus on customer service.

A paradigm shift is required in our service culture. It is important that we transition from viewing good service as luxury to seeing it as ordinary. Everyone wants some level of respect and would like to be treated with dignity. We therefore must each resolve to change the way we interact and work. We must become courteous, polite, respectful and slow to anger. These virtues do not reduce our effectiveness but increase what we can achieve. We must wear smiles despite our individual circumstances and say 'please' and 'thank you' as often as possible. We must become calmer and follow queues for these would reduce our blood pressure and demonstrate our respect for one another. We must give good service and not accept poor treatment from anyone. This is not suggesting a fight when treated poorly but that we should raise concerns politely and educate those who do not know any better. Respect must become reciprocal – speak with junior colleagues and people of lower status softly, defer to superior opinion even when it comes from a young person and greet everyone with love and respect.

In doing the foregoing we will find that our society will become a more pleasant place to live. After all, there are calm, warm and friendly people in many countries who live long and fulfilled lives. In fact, societies where citizens have the longest life expectancy, such as Japan and Singapore with 84 years, are characterized by excellent personal and public service cultures. Good service maintains peace, order and happiness. It increases the quality and span of life. Avoiding shouting, aggression, fighting and bitterness reduces the toxins that our bodies generate and helps us to improve our health. Good service increases patronage in our business. A positive experience spurs repeat business while a nasty experience damages reputation and causes people to sabotage the business. Bad experiences may not have had glaring consequences on the bottom line of many Nigerian businesses thus far but, as our economy grows and more businesses open, people become spoiled with choice,

incomes rise and there is bound to be evident consequences of bad service experience. Countries such as Kenya, South Africa and Malaysia have focused on building the service culture and thus far been successful in growing their tourism industry and generating significant national revenue.

What must be done

1. Focus on inculcating manners at home and teaching civic education at school. Home training is important and the right message and attitude must be passed unto our households. Parents should not abdicate their responsibilities to train their children, to television, school or staff. They should show good example and spend time to ensure that simple virtues such as politeness and courtesy are found in their households. Likewise, schools should in addition to teaching core subjects spend time to teach children about community living and what our national creed means.

2. Re-organize public institutions tasked with service quality. To mention a few, the National Orientation Agency has the responsibility of orienting Nigerians and should in addition to what it does, educate citizens on their rights to be served well. Servicom must be overhauled urgently to understand points of service and institute timelines, mechanisms for resolution and consequences for erring parties. It must reflect what it seeks to achieve and be strengthened to do so. Consumer Protection Agency should either be expanded to enable it cater to complaints of poor service or broken up to adequately cater to service improvement.

3. Prioritise service training for all front line officers. The government should make it compulsory for all firms providing service to subject their staff to basic customer service training. The body responsible for providing such training should issue certificates of compliance to all complying institutions and should have the capacity to monitor compliance and recommend sanctions for erring institutions. Such a body should be jointly developed and run with public and private sector participants to ensure that it adequately meets societal expectations. In addition, firms in the hospitality business should invest time and resources in setting standards and holding themselves accountable to these standards. It is only by so doing that they can become internationally competitive.

We can deepen economic development through an improvement in service standards and it should become the focus of each one of us to do all in our capacity to give better service. Let us live our anthem and pledge by serving with heart and might and by serving with love, strength and faith.

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