

**CUSTOMERS' PERCEPTIONS OF THE SERVICES OF THE VOLTA RIVER  
AUTHORITY: A CASE STUDY FOR UPPER WEST AREA OF THE NORTHERN  
ELECTRICITY DEPARTMENT**

**1. Mrs. Joana Rita Tembil, 2. Mr. Nathaniel Kojo Baena, 3. Jennifer Lariba Nabdoya,  
4. Justina Atuk Agaab**

Bolgatanga Polytechnic, Box 767, Ghana-West Africa  
and  
VRA/NED, Upper East Area, Box 19, Ghana-West Africa  
and  
Bolgatanga Polytechnic, P. O. Box 767, Ghana -West Africa  
and  
Bolgatanga Polytechnic, P. O. Box 767, Ghana -West Africa

**IJASR 2019**

**VOLUME 2**

**ISSUE 6 NOVEMBER - DECEMBER**

**ISSN: 2581-7876**

**Abstract** – The study generally sought to ascertain the views of customers on the factors that influence their satisfaction or otherwise with the services provided by the Northern Electricity Department of the Volta River Authority (VRA/NED) and the training offered to staffs of VRA/NED in relation to customer care to enable them deliver quality customer service. The study was limited to the Upper West Area of the NED. Stratified sampling, proportion, simple random sampling and census techniques were employed to select the sample of 150 customer respondents and 50 staff of the Upper West Area for the study.

1. The researchers administered two sets of questionnaires; one for customers and the other set for staff. The questionnaires were administered by the researchers, assisted by two assistants. The data were presented in Tables whilst frequency distributions and percentages were used to analyse the data.

2. The study revealed that customers have a negative perception of the services of VRA/NED. The study also showed that training in customer care has improved the knowledge, skills and attitudes of staff but needs to be regular.

1. It is recommended that VRA/NED should invest in new equipment to minimize or reduce power outages. The Authority should also intensify its public education to reduce the negative perception of it. Refresher courses in customer care should be more regular for staff to be abreast of new trends in service delivery and incentive packages be provided to staff who handle customers.

**Keywords:** PERCEPTIONS, SERVICES ,VOLTA RIVER AUTHORITY, Customers, bills and payment point

**Introduction**

According to Dei-Tumi (2005), the dominant philosophy that has driven businesses today defines a company as an economic entity and the job of management is to leverage capital. As a result, many companies have treated their customers with little respect as if it is the customer who needs the company most. There are still companies today that are yet to come to the full realization that today's customer has alternatives and real business growth starts with the customer as the focus.

Customers' perception of an organisation's product or service is paramount to the success or failure of the business. If an organisation does not make the effort to find out what its customers think of its services, it can be caught off-balance when the customers go elsewhere. According to Dei-Tumi (2005), organisations and businesses with inaccurate perceptions of their customers' needs most often make untested and unwarranted assumptions about what customers think, rely on weak anecdotal evidence, attach too much importance to isolated incidents and accord too much weight to opinions of small numbers of highly articulate customers. If the

company does not make the effort to find out what its customers think, it can easily lose them. The modern day customer is highly enlightened and has alternatives. An organisation's research findings whatever they may be, must be analysed and action taken to maintain competitive advantage. The last thing a company should want in today's business environment is to lose a customer, which can prove very costly.

In recent times many issues have arisen calling for new approach to business or strategic management systems to enhance organisational performance to achieve greater results and growth. According to Shepherd (2003), organisations are known as planned co-ordination of the activities of a number of people for the achievement of some common, explicit purpose/mission through division of labour and function with hierarchy of authority and responsibility. Public organisations provide services governed by missions and culture that grow rather than being created or designed. These organisations are therefore planned and co-ordinated institutions, run by members to achieve set goals for them at given periods. These interdependent systems are structured in certain patterns to depict the organisation's power, role, task and person cultures in the form of strategic planning.

Organisations exist for the basic fact that they have some goals to achieve through accomplishing certain tasks which are undertaken by individual job holders who have diverse skills, knowledge levels and attitudes. Management has the responsibility to work out the required performance levels of employees and diagnose deficiencies that need positive improvement through initiating training and development programmes to maximize productivity and growth sustenance. Some public organisations however, disregard this idea as a trivial factor that needs less attention as far as productivity is concerned. They regard manpower training and development in the area of strategic planning as time consuming and an avoidable cost to the organisation, to the detriment of their customers and the organisation as a whole. The sustenance of every business lies in the ability of the organisation to maintain its image through planning, implementation and control of programmes designed to create, build and maintain mutual beneficial exchanges in relationships with customers for the purpose of achieving organisational goals and thereby carving a niche for itself different from all other competitors.

Over the last decade organisations of all types and sizes have increasingly come to understand the importance of customer satisfaction. Customer satisfaction has therefore become the key operational goal for many organisations. They have invested heavily in improving performance in areas that make a strong contribution to customer satisfaction such as quality and customer service. Loyalty schemes have proliferated in the retail sector and are now moving into business sector. Organisations in the public sector have developed customer charters to demonstrate their commitment to customers and just about every "mission statement" includes a reference to satisfying or, increasingly, delighting customers.

It is a widely accepted adage in the quality world that "if you can't measure it you can't manage it (Hill and Alexander, 2006). The principle applies equally to customer satisfaction as it does to thousands of components coming off a production line. However most companies measure (and consequently manage) component manufacture far more thoroughly than they do customer satisfaction. Indeed, many companies and organisations still do not measure customer satisfaction at all. A good customer survey will accurately measure customer satisfaction and provide reliable data on which a company can base important management decisions and monitor improvement in performance.

Customer satisfaction is a measure of how an organisation's total product performs in relation to a set of customer requirements. The customer's view of an organisation's performance will be a perception (Hill and Alexander, 2006). Customer satisfaction is in the customer's mind and may or may not conform to the realities of the situation. People form attitudes quickly but change them only slowly. So customers may be wrong about a company's quality or their service but it is on those unreliable perceptions that millions of purchase decisions are made every day. Customer satisfaction measurement is therefore about measuring how customers perceived an organisation's performance as a supplier (Hill and Alexander, 2006).

Hill and Alexander, (2006) aver that a company cannot rely solely on internally generated information as guide to their success in satisfying customers. Although a company's quality assurance department may be faithfully reporting zero defects and its warehouse manager reporting 100 percent on-time dispatch, customers' perception may not have kept pace with the company's improvements in performance. For many organisations, customer surveys indicate that they have a communications task to improve customers' perception of performance rather

than a need to improve performance itself. The Public Relations (PR) aspect of customer satisfaction measurement is therefore important.

According to Hill and Alexander, (2006) the average business losses between 10 and 30 percent of its customers each year, but they often don't know which customers, they have lost, when and why they were lost or how much sale revenue and profit this customer decay has cost them. Far from worrying about customers they are losing, companies traditionally place more emphasis on winning new customers. Dissatisfaction is clearly the fundamental reason for customer decay. The overall gap which results in a dissatisfied customer is the gap between expectation and experience (service gap).

The next possible problem area is where managers of the organisation do not have an accurate understanding of customers' needs and priorities (the understanding gap). If they don't really know what is important to customers it is extremely unlikely that the organisation will do best what matters most to customers however much emphasis is placed on quality and service.

An organisation without an understanding of what matters most to customers will fail to deliver customer satisfaction if it has not translated customers' expectations into appropriate operating procedures and systems. This is the procedural gap. For example, a hotel may be fully aware that customers become very irritated if they have to spend more than five minutes checking out, but if the organisation does not set sufficient staffing levels during the busy 8:00a.m. - 9:00a.m. period, many customers will inevitably wait longer and leave dissatisfied.

Sometimes organisations have clear procedures which are well matched to customers' needs and priorities but do not achieve a high level of customer satisfaction because staff are insufficiently trained or disciplined to follow the procedures to the letter at all times. This is the behavioural gap. An organisation needs to take steps to monitor staff behaviour to ascertain whether the procedures are being consistently followed.

It is possible that the above discussed gaps do not exist but customers still have an unacceptable level of dissatisfaction. This is because customers' perception of the performance of an organisation may differ from reality. For example, a customer who was upset by offhand, unhelpful service sometime in the past will form an attitude that an organisation is uncaring and it may take some considerable time and much experience of good personal service before that perception is modified. No organisation intends to provide poor service and gaps usually arise because of difference in perception between what the business thought it was providing and what customers believe they have received. Only regular customer surveys will enable an organisation to identify and close the gaps (Hill and Alexander, 2006).

Many organisations have failed to communicate to their staff the importance of improving customer service. The required level of staff motivation will be generated only by measuring customer satisfaction which provides the basics for demonstrating the commitment of senior management and using targets and rewards to motivate staff.

### Customer perception survey

According to Hill and Alexander, (2006), a common dilemma faced by organisations about to measure customer satisfaction is whether to carry out a simple "customer perception survey" involving the company's existing customer base or whether to undertake a more complex market standing survey which requires a sample of all buyers in the market place to rate the performance of competing suppliers. A customer perception survey is of most value to organisations which are able to achieve their objectives by keeping their existing customer base satisfied. For organisations in the public sector, where competitive forces are few, a customer perception survey will be suitable, as indeed it will be for the many service businesses in the private sector. These latter businesses include professional service providers who rely for much of their income on repeat business from existing customers. Such customers will often have little knowledge of the performance of competing suppliers (Hill and Alexander, 2006).

In a customer perception survey customer satisfaction is measured at the point-of-sale or point of consumption (often the same for services), and customer perception surveys are widely used. Certain types of managers within organisations who are also likely to be more interested in their company's ability to provide good quality and good service can quite adequately check their own performance through a survey of existing customers. Many ISO 9000 assessment bodies are encouraging companies registered with them to undertake customer satisfaction surveys in

order to demonstrate that their quality management systems are really working. A customer perception survey would be appropriate for this purpose.

A further advantage of customer perception survey is that they are easier to carry out than market standing surveys and can be accomplished through a self – completion questionnaire (Hill and Alexander, 2006) This is important for organisations whose resources do not stretch to engaging an outside agency to undertake a survey. As there is only one supplier involved in a customer perception survey, respondents, of course, will know which organisation the survey is being undertaken for. The advantage is that it is not difficult to secure the willing participation of respondents in this survey (Hill and Alexander, 2006).

This study was therefore undertaken as a customer perception survey which targeted VRA-NED's existing customer base. The Volta River Authority (VRA) was established on April 26, 1961 under the Volta River Development Act, Act 46 of the Republic of Ghana, with the primary objective to generate and supply electrical energy for industrial, commercial and domestic use. The VRA started with the development of the hydroelectric potentials of the Volta River and the construction and maintenance of a nation-wide grid transmission system. Today it has expanded into distribution of electricity in the Northern sector of Ghana, and thermal generation to complement inadequate capacity for hydro generation.

The Authority has since 1961, harnessed the resources of the Volta River to provide electrical energy for industrial, commercial and domestic use in Ghana, as well as transportation, fishing and recreation. Starting with a generation capacity of 558MW from the Akosombo dam, VRA now operates a total hydro generation capacity of 1,180MW from its hydro generating plants at Akosombo and Kpong. This is complemented by thermal capacity of almost 550MW from its Thermal Power Plant Complex at Aboadze. Currently VRA is the sole producer of power in the entire country and continues to explore cleaner, cheaper and renewable sources of power generation such as gas, wind and solar energy to sustain power supply to meet customer demand and stakeholder expectation (VRA Diary 2011).

Following the promulgation of the Ghana Government Power Sector Reforms in 2005, the VRA's mandate has now been largely restricted to generation of electricity. The transmission function has been hived off to a separate entity, designated National Grid Company (GRIDCo) to perform the transmission activities. The VRA is planning to operate its distribution agency, the Northern Electricity Department (NED) as a subsidiary company. The amendment is expected to attract independent power producers onto the Ghana energy market.

The VRA sells power directly to some major bulk customers in Ghana such as the Electricity Company of Ghana (ECG) which is responsible for power distribution to consumers in the southern parts of Ghana, AngloGold Ashanti, Newmont Ghana Gold Ltd, Goldfields Ghana Ltd, Aluworks and Akosombo Textiles Limited.

The VRA also exports power to Togo, Benin and Burkina Faso and has power interchanges with La Cote d'Ivoire. Ghanaian and neighbouring countries customers are reached through GRIDCo's transmission system which covers the entire country and is also interconnected with the national electricity grids of Cote d'Ivoire, Togo and Burkina Faso. These interconnections now serve as part of the arrangement under the West African Power Pool (WAPP).

Its corporate vision is: "To Set the Standard for Public Sector Excellence in Africa". VRA's vision when summarized means "Product, People and Service excellence". The Corporate Mission of the VRA is "To produce electricity to power economies and raise the living standards of the people of Ghana and West Africa". Its Corporate Values are Team Work, Trust, Goal and Action Orientation, Integrity and Accountability.

The Management is headed by the Chief Executive at the corporate level who is supported by three deputies each responsible for the three branches namely Engineering and Operations branch, Finance branch, and Services branch. There is also a Public Relations Unit attached to the office of the Chief Executive. Each branch has Departments under it with a Director heading each department. The Engineering and Operations branch has the following Departments under it; Hydro Generation, NED, Technical Services, Thermal Generation, and Engineering Services Department.

The Finance branch comprises of two Departments namely, Procurement, and Finance Departments. The Services branch has the Human Resources Department, Legal Services Department, Health Services Department

and Real Estates and Security Department. Others are the General Services Department, Management Information Systems, and the VRA Schools.

The Authority has external links with some foreign partners or associates such as the Commonwealth Development Corporation, European Union, African Development Bank and the Canadian International Development Agency. Others are the Kuwait Fund for Arab Economic Development, European Development Fund, and Acres International.

The Northern Electricity Department (NED) which is the distribution agency of VRA was created in 1987 to distribute electric power in the Brong Ahafo, Northern, Upper East and Upper West Regions and parts of the Ashanti and Volta Regions. NED was developed as an integral part of the larger Northern Electrification Project (NEP) to extend electricity to communities in the northern part of Ghana. Its mission which is in consonance with the corporate mission is “To procure electricity and distribute it efficiently, safely and reliably in the Northern Sector of Ghana in a commercially viable manner.”

Customers of NED are served through the provision of technical and administrative responses to customer enquiries and providing correct and timely information to the customer. Accordingly, customers of NED are given services such as new connections, metering services, billing, attending to their enquiries and complaints, attending to faults at customer premises, education on VRA/NED operations and public safety and provision of payment points where customers go to pay their bills. A prospective customer who desires a new connection first calls at the office of VRA/NED to complete a standard application form. Technical personnel are assigned to visit the premises of the customer where the service is required to take materials and load estimates. Cost analysis is done by VRA/NED and the customer is formally notified of the cost by way of a letter (known as quotation). When the prospective customer has made full payment of the cost, a service contract is signed between the customer and VRA/NED. Technicians are assigned to install the network and an energy meter is provided. The customer is advised on how to take care of the meter. VRA/NED follows up on the new service installed at one monthly intervals. The customer’s meter is read monthly to ascertain how much energy has been consumed over the period and the customer is given monthly bills. NED has payment points where customers go to pay their bills or buy units for their prepaid meters and are given receipts by the cashier for all payments made.

NED also receives various types of complaints from customers such as faults on the network, inaccurate and/or late bills, wrongful disconnection of service, payments not reflecting on subsequent bills, faulty meter, unannounced power outages, etc. Such complaints are received, documented, investigated and rectified. VRA/NED also undertakes occasional public education programmes to educate its customers and the general public on its operations and electrical safety issues. NED’s objective is to distribute power in the most efficient and economic way to its numerous customers. These objectives are in consonance with the Authority’s corporate mission which is:

1. To develop, operate and maintain adequate distribution network for the supply of safe and reliable electrical energy to customers.
2. To continue to participate in the implementation of National Electrification Project/Self Help Electrification Project (NEP/SHEP)
3. To continue to improve electrical safety awareness among staff, customers and the general public.
4. To create and sustain cash to meet all operational requirements, as well as working capital needs.
5. To establish and maintain efficient procedure for billing and revenue collection.
6. To provide effective and efficient customer services.
7. To provide accurate and timely management information for effective planning and control of resources and maintain an organisational structure with highly motivated staffs that is capable of responding to current changes and challenges in the business environment.

### Statement of the problem

The VRA/NED has a monopoly over electricity supply in its areas of operation. This has the tendency of reducing the staff to mere salary earners instead of being customer/market oriented. The behaviour of staff can help or hinder a good transaction. It can make a customer feel intimidated and unwanted, hence the need to make the corporate vision of satisfying customers obvious to staff. In recent times, there has been much public outcry

about the quality of service delivered by VRA/NED as a utility service provider. For example, the Daily Graphic (Friday, January 20, 2006): 28 reported that the President of the Concerned citizens of Tamale had in a statement issued to the press complained about what he termed the “unfair treatment” meted out to residents of Tamale by the VRA/NED. Some of the grievances expressed included destruction of their electrical gadgets as a result of frequent power fluctuation/high voltage, and wrong disconnections of power supply.

A complainant at a public forum organised by the Public Utilities Regulatory Commission (PURC) in Tamale on January 25, 2006, accused Technicians of the VRA/NED of selling prepaid meters to consumers at an unofficial amount of between GH¢50.00 and GH¢60.00 before getting access to the prepaid meter which comes in a black polythene bag. He cautioned management to check the technical men to avert an attack on them.

On 7<sup>th</sup> and 8<sup>th</sup> January, 2006 the entire nation suffered unannounced power outages. At a news conference held by the then Minister for Energy, the Chief Executive Officer of the VRA, explained the cause of the outages which he attributed to equipment failure which the technical men had to identify and rectify (Ghana Television News, Monday, January 9, 2006). Yet the entire country again suffered prolonged unannounced power outages on the 20<sup>th</sup> and 21<sup>st</sup> of September, 2007 and on the 13<sup>th</sup> of November, 2007. These outages occurred at a time when the country was experiencing the national load shedding programme due to the low water level in the Akosombo dam.

A caption in The Mirror, (Thursday, April 9, 2009): page 33 read; “Utility Service providers under fire”. In the said news item, utility service providers in the Sekondi-Takoradi metropolis were criticized for their poor service delivery. Residents in the twin-city blamed the Electricity Company of Ghana (ECG) for frequent power outages and the Ghana Water Company (GWCL) for irregular water supply to the metropolis.

The PURC, in most recent times, has had cause to complain to VRA/NED about the deteriorating quality of service being rendered to customers in the three northern regions. This concern was expressed in a letter dated September 17, 2007 from the Executive Secretary of the Commission to the Managing Director of VRA/NED. Some of the complaints noted by the Commission included the duration of load management (load shedding) and non-functioning of revenue offices at various locations. The Commission found this state of affairs unacceptable and advised VRA/NED to take appropriate steps to enhance customer support and confidence.

### Objective of the study

The study generally seeks to ascertain the views of customers in the Upper West Region on the level of their satisfaction with the services provided by the Northern Electricity Department of the Volta River Authority (VRA/NED). The specific objectives are to:

- Ascertain customers’ general perception of the VRA/NED and its services.
- Assess the level of satisfaction of customers with the services of VRA/NED.
- Examine the complaints procedure in place in the VRA/NED and the familiarity of customers with it.
- Ascertain whether the feedback obtained from customers are incorporated into the company’s strategies to improve service delivery.
- Ascertain what training is offered to staff in relation to customer care to help them deliver quality service and how staff actually apply this knowledge in their work.
- Recommend ways VRA/NED can improve on its service delivery.

### Research questions

This section addresses the stated objectives of the study by way of posing the relevant questions for the field investigations:

- What is the Customer Charter of VRA/NED and how often does the Authority conduct customer research?
- What do customers think about the VRA/NED as an organisation and the services it provides?
- How satisfied are customers with the services provided by VRA/ NED?

- What complaint procedure is in place to customers for unsatisfactory level of service rendered to them and are customers familiar with it?
- How are customers complaints analysed periodically to serve as a basis for improvement in service delivery?
- What training is offered to staff in relation to customer care and how do staff actually apply this knowledge to their work?

## LITERATURE REVIEW

### Promoting customer relationship: The customer

The idea of a customer suggests a market orientation or that some transaction is taking place. In this way it is different from consumer. All organisations have customers, even those which do not manufacture a product. Customers are basically people with whom a business or organisation has dealings. They are usually categorized into external and internal customers. External customers are customers in the traditional sense of the word and include people who patronize products or services, such as the government, shareholders, other companies/organisations, client contacts, and suppliers. Without them there will be no sales, no business and no salaries. Internal customers are people who work in the organisation and rely on other employees for services, products and information to get their jobs done. Companies are awash with information about their customers; smart companies capture information at every possible customer touch point, including customer purchases, sales force contacts, service and support calls, website visits, satisfaction surveys, market research studies, etc. In this study, emphasis is being placed on the development, maintenance and enhancement of long term, profitable relationships. It involves developing relationships before any business can be conducted (Zikmund and D'Amico, 1996).

There are two types of customers, those who are current customers and those who are potential customers. These may have different needs and an organisation needs to respond to them accordingly. Meeting customer requirement involves offering them quality and satisfactory services through quality goods/services and good customer relationship.

### Customer service

Introducing quality customer service in an organisation requires a great deal of organisational and attitudinal changes for success. The bedrock of good customer service is a positive attitude and a change in mindset which is *sine qua non* for providing customer service that matches world class standards. Strickland (1997) observes that customer service is the assistance provided to help a customer with the purchase or use of a product. It applies to both goods and services and is concerned with all the contacts the customer has with the organisation's employees; from the receptionist to the employee making the service connection to the customers' premises. Customer service differentiates competitors. Providing exceptional customer service can give a firm a marketing advantage. Beating the competition in customer service is the key to success in many industries. Few things can hurt a firm more than not being able to deliver promised service.

Zikmund and D'Amico (1996) emphasizing on the interaction between a company and its customers observe that the rapport with customers should be one based on communication to ensure that customer expectations are met or exceeded, so that an on-going mutually satisfying relationship can continue. It may involve follow-up activities, solving customers' problem, continuing to provide timely information, monitoring customer satisfaction and making improvements as are necessary, etc. The customer should be seen as the fulcrum, the pivot point on which the business moves in operating for the balanced interests of all concerned (Zikmund and D'Amico, 1996). An efficient organisation seeks feedback from customers, rather than wait for problems to surface. Management in this sense is being proactive.

A business model built around customer service in the confusion of the crowded market place cannot fail. It is a winning strategy. It is not merely smiling at the customer; it is about building a long lasting relationship which can only lead to repeat business and make customers the sales force for the business (Dei-Tumi, 2005).

According to Strickland (1997) one company defined its core values as honesty, integrity and fairness which are cornerstones of their relationship with their customers, suppliers and employees. People are central to everything the company accomplishes and functional excellence, combined with team-work across functions and profit centers were essential to achieving superb execution.

Also relevant to this study was Manning and Reece (1997) suggestion that, for an organisation to achieve its goals, it must give more attention to its strategic planning by taking into consideration, all of the major functional areas of the business that must be coordinated, such as production, marketing, finance, and personnel. This sets the stage for a form of higher quality consultative marketing that is team-work, more structured, more focused, and more efficient, the result of which is better time allocation, more precise problem solving and a greater chance of a good match between the product or service and the customer's needs (Manning and Reece, 1997). Customer loyalty is the major reward of good customer service as customers well served are customers retained.

Dei-Tumi (2005) observes that customer service for most organisations is perceived to be a department of the business with only few employees assigned the responsibility of solving customer complaints. To him this is too limited a view because if customer service is left to only the sales or complaints handling process of the business system, then it is being treated as a line management function and therefore promotes a situation where the business hierarchy does not appreciate the critical role of customer service to the overall success of the business, or their role in ensuring good customer service. The values and focus of the business to meet customer's needs will have been compromised. He argues that customer service must be led right throughout the organization, from the top, with the direct involvement of senior management.

According to Martin (1989) as cited in Dei-Tumi (2005), delivering quality customer service requires knowledge and the devotion of a great deal of concentrated effort to doing the right thing. The changing nature of the global marketplace is reshaping the business landscape, giving room to businesses with excellent customer rewarding programmes and a proactive team of employees to capture a large segment of the market leaving those whose companies which serve customers' poorly, to sink into oblivion or bankruptcy.

Today in business it is important to treat customer relationship as sacred as never before. Customer service has become more an issue of attitude. Quality in any customer service interaction does not just happen. It requires a complete change of mind and the willingness to serve the people who need the services of your business. It is only fair that those who pay for the products and services should be listened to sensitively, and responded to seriously, sympathetically and effectively (Dei-Tumi, 2005).

### **Customer satisfaction**

According to Kotler, Fahey, and Jatusripitak (2005), in earlier periods, there was little need for such concerns for customer relationships or satisfaction. In a seller's market, characterized by shortages and near-monopolies-companies did not make special efforts to please customers. By contrast, in buyers' market, customers can choose from a wide array of goods and services. Therefore if sellers fail to deliver acceptable product and service quality, they will easily lose customers to competitors. In addition, Kotler et al, (2005) assert that what is acceptable today, may not be acceptable to tomorrow's ever demanding consumers. Consumers are becoming more sophisticated and demanding, and their quality expectations have been raised by the practices of superior manufacturers and retailers (Kotler et al, 2005).

Today's companies face tough competition and things will only get harder. To succeed, companies have to move from a product and selling philosophy to a customer and marketing philosophy. Companies must be customer-centred – they must deliver superior value to their target customers. They must become adept in building customer relationships, not just building products. They must be skilful in market engineering, not just product engineering. According to Kotler et al, (2005), too often, marketing is ignored in the boardroom of companies with the view that the job of obtaining and maintaining customers is the job of the marketing or sales department. Although marketing plays a leading role, it is only a partner in attracting and keeping customers. The world's best marketing department cannot successfully sell poorly made products that fail to meet consumer needs. The marketing department can be effective only in companies in which all departments and employees have teamed up to form a competitively superior customer value-delivery system.



Drucker (1974) lending support to Kotler et al, (2005), asserts that a customer-centred company focuses on customer developments in-designing its marketing strategies and on delivering superior value to its target customers. They are unanimous that, consumers buy only from the firm that they believe offers the highest customer delivered value, i.e. the difference between total customer value and total customer cost. Empirical evidence suggests that, buyers operate under various constraints and sometimes make choices that give more weight to their personal benefit than to company benefit. However, the customer delivered value framework applies to many situations and yields rich insights. The framework suggests that sellers must first assess the total customer value and total customer cost associated with their own and competing marketing offers to determine how their own offers measure up in terms of customer delivered value (Zikmund, 2007).

Today's customers face a growing range of choices in the products and services they can buy. They base their choices on their perceptions of quality, value and service. Companies need to understand the determinants of customer value and satisfaction. Customer delivered value is the difference between total customer value and total customer cost. Customers will normally choose the offer that maximizes their delivered value. Customer satisfaction is the outcome felt by buyers who have experienced a company performance that has fulfilled or exceeded their expectations. Customers are satisfied when their expectations are met and delighted when their expectations are exceeded. To create customer satisfaction, companies must manage their own value chains and the entire value delivery system in a customer-centred way. The company's goal is not only to get customers, but, even more importantly, to retain customers. (Kotler et al, 2005).

According to Dei-Tumi (2005), today's business should concern itself more with customer satisfaction than customer service. We are in an era where customer satisfaction can mean the success or demise of an organisation. The customer is the purpose for the establishment of any organisation and today's customer is far better educated and has better access to information on what is available on the market as a result of developments in information technology. The challenge in the marketplace is therefore the need to understand the needs of a constantly better informed client base. The future belongs to businesses which are not only aware of these needs in the marketplace, but are also constantly asking relevant questions of the customer and at short intervals, so that internal structures can be re-aligned and programmed to meet these needs.

### Customer service on corporate image

Image is an important factor in business success. A good image can take years to build, but it can be quickly tarnished by negative publicity. There are several kinds of image; the mirror, current, wish, corporate and multiple image. According to the Training and Development Manual of VRA (2001), Mirror image refers to the image people in an organisation believe to be the impression outsiders have of the organisation. Current image is the image held by people outside the organisation. It may be based on experience or on poor information and understanding. Outsiders are important because they could be potential staff, customers, journalists, etc. It is necessary that their impression, their mental picture of the organisation or its staff, products or services is favourable.

According to Kotler et al, (2005), corporate image refers to the image of the organisation itself rather than of the products or services. It may be made up of the company history, financial success and stability, quality of service, industrial relations, social responsibility, etc. The public gains an instant image of what an organisation is really like when they first come into contact with it. A strong positive image can enhance the organisation across all its operations. It also results in people trusting it and its services. Customer satisfaction is important to sustain business as well as promote a good image of the organisation. Dissatisfied customers will surely tell their experience to at least nine others. It is crucial to ensure that customers come back, so any value you can add in terms of customer service is a vital element in defending your organisation's image (Kotler et al, 2005).

Customer loyalty is the major reward of customer service as customers well-served are customers retained. Whatever combination of quality, design, branding, packaging and customer service components an organisation offers, it should be prepared to alter the components to adapt to a dynamic marketing environment. The future and continuous existence of every organisation depends on how well it is able to retain its customers. The

customer is the only boss who can fire everybody in the company from the chairman down, simply by spending his money somewhere else (Zikmund and D'Amico, 1996).

Customer service is a very important part of customer satisfaction. Customers who receive high-quality service will be more likely to come back. A sales organisation that can develop a reputation for servicing each sale will be sought out by customers who want a long-term partner to help them with their buying needs. Satisfied customers represent an "auxiliary" sales force – a group of people who will recommend customer-driven organisations to others. If customers are pleased with the service that they receive after the sale, be assured that they will tell other people. Word-of mouth advertising is a powerful force in marketing (Manning and Reece, 1997). In organisations that wish to improve levels of service quality, managers identify customer service needs and plan the level of service quality. Front line personnel are then trained and given the responsibility for delivering high-quality service. These personnel need to be motivated to deliver the service according to the specifications planned by management. Finally, and on a regular basis, the results are measured against the standards. This therefore calls for an element of flexibility to fit the changing environment (McGregor, 1960).

### Role of customer-facing staff

The direct interaction of the customer-facing staff with the customer determines the future of a customer's relationship with an organisation. Brilliant organisational mission statements and values notwithstanding, the extent to which any business will be willing to invest in the training of its customer-facing staff has become a real major yardstick in determining the profitability and continuous existence of such business. Thus, all strategic planning schemes of a business must begin with the concerns of the customer and person at the forefront of the focus of corporate strategy and planning.

Dei-Tumi (2005) notes that the customer is the one who rewards the companies that serve him excellently and allows those who serve him poorly to fail. And in the competitive marketplace the penalty for misreading the customer for even a short time can be massive. Every company small or large that intends to be successful must therefore have both the willingness and ability to change to serve the customer well or risk extinction. A company must ask itself regularly if they are completely up to date in the best ways to get to know their customers' in the bid to gain business advantage through the harnessing of good ideas. According to him the notion that quality customer service depends solely on personal skills is a misconception. He argues that customer service standards can be improved tremendously through training and the introduction of customer service programmes as an integral part of the business training process. Customer service must be appreciated as an attitude for which training is required with motivation and committed leadership from the top, to help increase profitability.

The customer contact strategy addresses how a company initiates and maintains contact with customers so as to maintain the public image of the organisation. A successful relationship requires a firm commitment from both parties – customers and the organisation. Most organisations do this through the Public Relations Department. The Public Relations Department is very essential in every sizeable organisation. It identifies, establishes and maintains mutually beneficial relationships between an organisation and the various publics on which its success or failure depends. These include employees, customers, stockholders, community members, the government, etc. Public Relations Department exists in organisations to among other things:

- Promote and encourage public involvement in the strategic planning process of the organisation.
- Evaluate public opinion towards the organisation and its employees
- Make recommendations to management, Senior Staff Association and the local Trades Union concerning policies and actions that have an effect on public opinion.
- Conduct programmes designed to keep the public informed, within the limitations of accuracy, propriety and policy on the activities of the organisation and its employees. These external programmes are usually termed Public Information and Community Relations.
- Conduct programmes designed to keep company's staff effective on relations with customers.

In a modern, complex society, it is necessary for every organisation seeking public support to establish and maintain information programmes in order to create a common ground of understanding with the public. A wise firm makes public relations a function of top management – so that every major business decision is considered from the stand point of its public impact.

According to Zikmund (2007), for profitable customer relations, the organisation must acknowledge that customers are always and unquestionably right, treat customers with respect and endeavour to address customers' needs and queries promptly. Customers must be informed immediately if for any reason their queries cannot be dealt with promptly and the organization must sincerely believe that each customer and every prospect is unquestionably honest until proved otherwise.

### **The concept of perception**

According to Mullins (2007) perceived reality, not actual, is the key to understanding behaviour. How we perceive others and ourselves is at the root of our action and intentions. The words we use, the way we look and the body language we display communicate our view of the world. The importance of perception and communications guiding our behaviour needs to be understood for effective relationship with others. Most people only see the things they think they are seeing by watching what they see in the environment within which it happens and draw conclusions (Mullins, 2007). This implies that most customers will only see what they want to see about a service provider.

The significance of individual differences is particularly apparent when focusing on the process of perception. People see things in different ways. They all have their own unique picture or image of how they see the 'real' worlds and this is a complex and dynamic process. People do not passively receive information from the world; they analyse and judge it. They may place significance on some information and regard other information as worthless; and may be influenced by their expectations so that they 'see' what they expect to see or 'hear' what they expect to hear. The importance of understanding the perceptual process is even more significant today.

Perceptions are the root of all organisational behaviour: any situation can be analysed in terms of its perceptual connection. Two individuals may interpret a situation differently even though the situation may be the same. For instance, one person may see a product as user-friendly but another person may feel that it is far too simplistic and basic. The physical properties may be identical, but they are perceived quite differently because each individual has imposed upon the object/environment/person their own interpretation, their judgement, evaluation.

To understand perception we need to take into account its sensory basis. We are not able to attend to everything in our environment; our sensory systems have limits. The physical limits therefore insist that we are selective in our attention and perception. The way in which we categorize sensory information is based on a range of factors including the present situations, our emotional state and any experiences of the same or similar event. Some information may be considered highly important to us and may result in immediate action or speech: in other instances, the information may be simply 'parked' or assimilated in other ideas or thoughts. The link between perception and memory processes become obvious. Some of the 'parked' material may be forgotten or indeed, changed and reconstructed over time.

The process of perception explains the manner in which information (stimuli) from the environment around us is selected and organised to provide meaning for the individual. Perception is the mental function of giving significance to stimuli such as taste, sounds, touch, smell, pain, pressures, and feelings. Perceptions give rise to individual behavioural responses to particular situations. Despite the fact that a group of people may 'physically see' the same thing, they each have their own version of what is seen- their perceived view of reality (Mullins, 2007).

Psychological factors will also affect what is perceived. Thus internal factors such as personality, learning and motives, will give rise to an inclination to perceive certain stimuli with a readiness to respond in certain ways. This is called an individual's perceptual set. Factors that affect an individual's perceptual set include personality, learning, intelligence, ability, training, interest, expectations, goals, past experiences and motivation. The needs of an individual will affect their perceptions. For example, a manager deeply engrossed in preparing an urgent report may screen out ringing telephones, the sound of computers, people talking and furniture being moved in the next

office, but will respond readily to the smell of coffee brewing. The most desirable and urgent needs will almost certainly affect an individual's perceptual process (Mullins, 2007).

Abnory (2001) lending support to Mullins (2007) states that the influences that cause people to select, organise and interpret information are mainly psychological. Each individual is unique and different due to the individual's psychological factors such as state of health, age, sex, fatigue, height, weight and the event of the daily cycles. According to Abnory (2001), psychological make-ups, personal needs, interests and biases shape people's perceptions. There are many ways to interpret an event, and several factors cause people to interpret an event in one way or the other. Past experience, the type of assumptions one makes about human behaviour and one's expectations of an event all go to influence the interpretation of the event.

Past experience takes the form of skepticisms, doubt, disbelief and no trust. People are often very quick in labeling personalities and human behaviours in positive or negative instances and labels. People's anticipation or expectation also shapes interpretation (Abnory, 2001). A customer's past experience, knowledge and expectations of a service provider therefore may influence their perception about that service provider.

Similarly, knowledge, personal aspiration and moods are all important variables and indications to interpretation. If one interprets events on moods such as feelings of insecurity, confidence, happiness, sadness, and so on, this interpretation may not be accurate. Whatever it is, there is no gainsaying that interpretation do shape people's thought and deeds which in effect influence people's perception (Abnory 2001).

The knowledge of, familiarity with or expectations about a given situation will influence perception. External factors refer to nature and characteristics of the stimuli. There is usually a tendency to give attention to stimuli which are for example: large, moving, intense, loud, bright, and repeated or stand out from the background. Any number of these factors may be present at a given time or in a given situation. It is therefore the total pattern of the stimuli together with the context in which they occur that influence perception.

According to Armstrong (2006), attitudes are developed through experience and can change as new experience is gained or influence absorbed. Within organisations attitudes are affected by cultural factors (value and norms), policies such as those concerned with pay, recognition, promotion and the quality of working life, and the influence of the 'reference group' (the group with whom people identify).

Behaviour will be influenced by the perceptions of individuals about the situation they are in (Armstrong, 2006). The term 'psychological climate' has been coined by James and Sells (1981) to describe how people's perceptions of a situations gives it psychological significance and meaning.

The way in which people perceive others and make judgment about them is explained by attribution theory, which concerns the assignment of causes to events. People make an attribution when they perceive and describe other people's actions and try to discover why they behaved in the way they did. Heider (1958) has pointed out that in everyday life people form ideas about other people and about social situations. They interpret other people's actions and predict what they will do under certain circumstances.

In attributing causes to other peoples actions people distinguish between what is in the person's power to achieve and the effect of environmental influence. A personal cause whether someone or an organisation does well or badly, may for example, be the amount of effort displayed, while a situational cause may be the extreme difficulty of the task (Armstrong, 2006).

Kelley (1967) has suggested four criteria that people apply to decide whether behaviour is attributable to personal rather than external (situational) causes:

- Distinctiveness – the behavior can be distinguished from the behaviour of others in similar situations;
- Consensus – If other people agree that the behaviour is governed by some personal characteristics;
- Consistency over time – whether the behaviour is repeated;
- Consistency over modality (i.e the manner in which things are done) – whether or not the behaviour is repeated in different situations.

Mullins (2007) states that every person sees things in their own way as perceptions become a person's reality this can lead to misunderstandings. The accuracy of interpersonal perception and the judgments made about other

people are influenced by the nature of the relationship between the perceiver and the other person, amount of information available to the perceiver and the order in which information is received and the nature and extent of interaction between the two people. Two main features that can create particular difficulties and give rise to perceptual problems, bias or distortions with other people are the halo effect and stereotyping.

The halo effect is the process by which the perception of a person is formulated on the basis of a single favourable or unfavourable trait or impression. The halo effect tends to shut out other relevant characteristics of that person. Some examples might be as follows:

- A candidate for employment, who arrives punctually, is smart in appearance and friendly may well influence the perception of the selectors, who then place less emphasis on the candidate's technical ability, qualifications or experience for the job.
- A new member of staff who performs well in a first major assignment may be perceived as a likely person for promotion, even though that assignment is not typical of the usual duties the member of staff is expected to undertake.
- A single trait, such as good attendance and time-keeping, may become the main emphasis for judgement of overall competence and performance rather than other considerations such as the quantity, quality and accuracy of work.

A particular danger with the halo effect is that where quick judgements are made on the basis of readily available stimuli, the perceiver may become 'perceptually blind' to subsequent stimuli at variance with the original perception and (often subconsciously) notice only those characteristics that support the original judgement (Mullins, 2007).

Stereotyping on the other hand is the tendency to ascribe positive or negative characteristics to a person on the basis of a general categorisation and perceived similarities. The perception of that person may be based more on certain expected characteristics than on the recognition of that person as an individual. It is a form of typecasting. Stereotyping is a means of simplifying the process of perception, making sense of the world and making judgements of other people instead of dealing with a range of complex and alternative stimuli. It occurs when an individual is judged on the basis of the group to which it is perceived that person belongs. When we see all people belonging to a particular group as having the same characteristics we are stereotyping individuals. The judgments are therefore made about an individual without ever really knowing whether such judgments are accurate; they may be wildly wrong. Examples of common stereotyping may be based on:

- Age, for example all young people are unreliable, no old person wants to consider new ideas;
- Education, for example all graduates are intelligent;
- Physical, for example all fat people are lazy;

Although stereotyping condenses the amount of information that we need to know and thus enable us to cope with a vast information flow, the consequences of attributing incorrect characteristics are extremely negative. Stereotyping infers that all people within a particular perceived category are assumed to share the same traits or characteristics. A significant social implication of stereotyping is therefore the perception held about particular groups of people based on, for example gender, race, sexual orientation, disability, religious belief and age. A major danger of stereotyping is that it can block out accurate perception of the individual or individual situation. Stereotyping may lead to potential situations of prejudice or discrimination.

### Understanding customer behaviour

According to Hill and Alexander (2006), part of a customer's satisfaction with a product or service is determined before its consumption. It is before and sometimes during purchase that the customer forms expectations about the forthcoming benefits of the product or service and thereafter its performance will always be judged against those expectations. Anyone involved in measuring customer satisfaction must therefore have an understanding of the ways in which customers make and evaluate their purchase decisions.

These decision-making processes will differ between consumer and organisational markets and according to the complexity of the decision. The decision making unit (DMU) can be quite large for some products and service in

organisational markets and it is essential that the views of all DMU members are accommodated in a customer survey.

### Individual buying behaviour

The steps an individual takes in making a buying decision may appear simple enough, but considerable activity (both mental and physical) may contribute to the process. Hill and Alexander (2006) suggest five steps in the process.

Before the purchase decision-making process can begin the consumer must first become aware of the existence of a need. Once the consumer has perceived this felt need, they will be motivated towards its satisfaction. A need can be aroused through internal and external stimuli. For example, hunger pangs may originate purely internally if a long time has elapsed since eating or they may be triggered by external stimuli such as walking past a baker's shop. A supplier of goods will aim to stimulate needs through means such as advertising. Once a person is aware of a need it becomes a "drive" and they feel urged to satisfy it. Companies and organisations must therefore understand what it is that drives consumers to choose their particular product or service rather than that of their competitors. Organisations use promotional and selling techniques to position their product or service in the market in such a way that it appeals to potential customers.

Once aware of a need or problem, an individual will set about solving it. Sometimes a problem is solved immediately. For example, hunger is felt and a biscuit may be eaten. Sometimes the problem is more complex and the individual has to seek out information to help him or her solve it. The first source of information most people turn to is memory. For example, if one needs a new exhaust for their car, their first thought will almost certainly be towards the solution of this problem the last time it arose. They will try to recollect the one who fitted the new exhaust, if it was all right, and whether the service was efficient and reasonably priced. If their memory is favourable, that may be the end of it. They may skip the evaluation stage and make the decision to return to the same supplier as last time.

However, an individual's memory is often not a particularly reliable guide to what actually happened and subjective perceptions of events are usually not overburdened with the need to conform to reality. People often remember those things they choose to remember. In particular, people tend to remember bad, as opposed to good, experiences more vividly and far longer. But the individual customer will be quite happy with all this; his or her perception of events is reality and has to become reality for any supplier trying to sell goods or service to that individual. Often, however the information search will be lengthier. One may not be entirely satisfied that the information stored in their memory is adequate enough to enable them make the best decision. If this is the case they will turn to external sources of information. They might ask for prices from two or three different suppliers (Hill and Alexander, 2006).

An individual who has never replaced an exhaust before will consult external sources of information such as using a friend, the next door neighbour, or a relative who has experience of this kind of purchase and could give good advice. Again the individual might rely on commercial sources of information which would consist mainly of exhaust centres advertising in the local press. This individual may not be actively seeking information the whole time but will be in a stage of heightened attention. In other words, they will be alert to any information concerning the felt need whether it arises in advertisement, articles or casual conversation.

Once a number of alternative ways of meeting a felt need has become evident the alternatives must now be evaluated. This involves determining how well each option meets the felt need. This process may be very objective, with the advantages and disadvantages of each option weighed against other alternatives. However objective the individual intends to be, subjective factors always influence the evaluation process to a greater or lesser extent. Three sets of objective factors, usually have an influence at the evaluation stage namely beliefs, attitudes, and intentions (Hill and Alexander, 2006).

Beliefs are deeply entrenched views, often based on the core values of an individual's country, sub-group (for example, ethnic group), and social class. Although beliefs are sometimes hard to articulate they nevertheless form the foundation for much decision – making behaviour. Beliefs are also, of course, social, political and religious. An individual's underlying beliefs help to form attitudes about specific events, places, products, services and so on.

These attitudes are liable to change more frequently than beliefs, being strongly influenced by family, social groups, lifestyle, age and income.

In commercial terms, an individual's attitude towards particular brands of coffee might be influenced by that individual's spending power, the type of coffee favoured by his or her friends and by the underlying belief that the quality of branded products is higher than that of own label products. Individuals also have objectives, priorities, and aspirations that they are striving to attain and these will often be reflected in their purchasing decisions. Thus one factor in an individual's choice of cold blend coffee might be wanting visitors to know that he or she uses good coffee.

Familiarity with all three components of the customer's evaluation process is necessary to understand customer satisfaction. The process also illustrates the fact that customer satisfaction is rarely a simple relationship between supplier and customer. An individual's evaluation of a product or service will almost always be affected by others.

Having weighed up the alternatives a decision is made. A factor at this stage is the level of risk the customer will associate with his or her purchase. The risk level is higher for expensive items where the buyer's product knowledge is poor and, consequently, difficulty arises in evaluating alternatives.

Some decision makers who carry out their intention to purchase will be totally satisfied with the products and others less so. Whatever the outcome, the buyer is likely to remember this level of satisfaction, and, for all but the most trivial purchases, memory is likely to be influenced in subsequent similar decision – making situations.

Some purchases, particularly important and expensive ones, tend to result in a great deal of subsequent reappraisal by buyers. Doubts can be experienced by consumers when they realize that some of their unchosen alternatives also have desirable attributes; their state of heightened attention is often increased after a purchase. Promotional material will be noticed, other competing products inspected and their owners possibly questioned. It is as though buyers are trying to convince themselves that they were smart enough to have made a good decision. In this situation it is wise for companies to do all they can to reinforce consumers' confidence in their products.

## RESEARCH METHODS

### Study design

The study is a descriptive survey. A descriptive research is one in which data are gathered from individuals or social or community groups in their natural environment for the purpose of studying interactions, attitudes, or characteristics of individuals or groups. It includes analysis, facts of a story arranged in a chronological order and conclusions. It can be about groups, individuals, organisations, events, or geographical units and the data are usually detailed and varied.

### Population for the study

The population for the study consists of all customers in the Upper West Area of VRA/NED which includes domestic, non-residential, commercial and industrial users of VRA energy supply. Since customer service involves providing service by staff which is received by customers the study also covered all staff of the Upper West Area of VRA-NED. Staff who come in contact with customers are the main objects and creators of customers' perception of a business and unless such individuals are well trained they can be very unprofessional. They need to acquire basic training in interpersonal skills, problem solving and personal grooming as well as the ability to accommodate customers' individual needs. They also need to have great respect for time.

According to Dei-Tumi (2005) an organisation that looks after its customers and also takes care of the people who look after the customer should succeed. This means that an organisation must also pay attention to the needs of its staff who have contact with its customers. This is why the study also sought staff opinion to ascertain the kind of training they had gone through, the frequency of such training and the logistics and incentives provided to motivate them to deliver.

### Sample size

According to Hill and Alexander (2006), it is not feasible for most studies to undertake a census survey, so a sample will have to be drawn. It is not the total size of the customer population that matters but the actual size of the sample. In practice, once a sample size exceeds 200 in a customer satisfaction survey (whatever the size of the total population), it is likely to give an acceptable degree of accuracy. Most samples for customer satisfaction surveys would fall in the range of 200-500 respondents. Increasing the sample size would improve the accuracy but at a very high cost (Hill and Alexander, 2006).

The sample size for the study was selected such that it was large enough to ensure representativeness. Due to financial and time constraints a sample of 150 out of 3,380 customers and 50 out of 122 staff employees were used.

### Data collection

Relevant data was collected through primary and secondary sources. Secondary data was obtained through the review of related literature from textbooks, journals, magazines, newsletters, reports, memos, etc. Other information from the national dailies and Ghana Television news were used. The study gathered primary information by the use of questionnaires and participatory observation. The questionnaire for customers was administered personally by the researchers and two assistants who could read and write the spoken language of the natives - Sissali. The data collected was transcribed and analysed.

### Sampling procedure

A formal request was made to VRA/NED for a list of all the customers of VRA/NED within the Upper West Area with their corresponding account numbers. This constituted the sampling frame (for customers). The list of all staff of the Upper West Area with their staff numbers was also sought to constitute the sampling frame for the staff.

There are seven Service Centres (or districts) in the Upper West Area namely Wa, Tumu, Lawra, Jirapa, Nadowli, Nandom and Bole. Each of these Service Centres has a number of communities that it oversees in addition to the main towns listed above. Simple random sampling was first employed to select one service centre (Tumu) for the study.

The customers in the selected service centre were then classified into three categories namely residential, non-residential and Special Load Tariff (SLT) customers. It is worth mentioning that due to the low industrial growth in the Upper West Region not all the service centres have SLT customers.

Stratified sampling technique was next employed to choose the number of customers from each category to be in the study sample. This was because the population is heterogeneous since there are three different categories of customers which use electricity for different purposes. The customers of these categories have different interests and so people would be dissatisfied for different reasons. Stratified sampling ensured that customers from the three categories were represented in the sample.

The total population of the selected service centre was divided into three (3) strata according to the categories stated above and the sample frame for the selected service centre was re-organized according to each stratum and the customers' names in each stratum re-assigned numbers serially to replace them. Proportional sampling was then used to determine the number of customers from each stratum to be in the sample as follows:

The Tumu Service Centre had a total of 3,380 customers with breakdown as follows: Residential 2,891, Non-residential 488 and SLT 1. The number of customers selected from the Residential category by proportion was  $[2,891/3,380] \times 150 = 128$ . Similarly, the number of customers selected from Non-Residential category was  $[488/3380] \times 150 = 21$ . It was not possible to use the same method to select the sample of SLT customers since there was only one. The study therefore used the census method to select the one customer for this category. The results are tabulated in Table 1:



**Table 1: Sample size on chosen categories of customers**

Category	No of customers	Sample size
Residential	2,891	128
Non-Residential	488	21
SLT	1	1
Total	3,380	150

Source: Fieldwork, 2008

Due to the large size of the residential and non-residential strata the study employed systematic sampling to select the customers to be in each stratum as follows:-

The sample fraction  $2,890/127$  for residential stratum was first determined.  $N_r$  is the size of the residential stratum of the selected service centre. Simple random sampling was used to select the first member from the stratum which was customer No 4. Then the second member using the systematic sampling was customer No. 27 ( $n + N_r/S_r$ ) etc. The next customer was No. 50. This was repeated until all respondents were selected. The process was repeated to select 21 respondents for the non-residential stratum.

Sampling of the staff was done as follows: The Upper West Area has 122 members of staff. Even though the staff population of 122 appeared manageable, a sample of 50 staff was used for the study due to resource and time constraints. This is 40% of the staff population and was considered large enough to ensure representativeness.

The staffs were classified into three categories namely Management, Senior Staff and Junior Staff. These constituted three strata. The main sample frame was re-organised according to each stratum and the employees' names in each stratum were re-assigned numbers serially to replace them. The stratified sampling technique was first employed to choose the number of employees from each stratum to be in the study sample. This was because the population is heterogeneous since there are three different categories of staff in the organisation. The employees of these categories have different responsibilities and so would have different understanding of the role that the customer plays in the business and what quality customer service is about. The stratified sampling ensured that employees from the three strata were represented in the sample.

Proportional sampling was then employed to determine the number of staff from each stratum to be included in the sample. The breakdown was as follows: Management Staff - 5, Senior staff - 43, and Junior staff - 74. The census method was used to select all five employees in the Management category. The number of employees selected from senior staff category was therefore  $43/117 \times 45 = 17$ ; similarly, the number of employees selected from Junior staff category was  $74/117 \times 45 = 28$ . The results are tabulated in Table 2. Simple Random Sampling was then used to select the actual people from the senior staff and junior staff strata for the sample. This was to give employees in each stratum an equal and unbiased chance of being chosen.

The assigned number to each staff of senior category was written on a card, from 1 to 43 and each number was cut and put into a box covered with a small opening. The box was then shaken thoroughly each time and an assistant was asked to pick a card from the box at random, until 17 senior staff was chosen for the sample.

The process was repeated to select 28 junior staff for the study sample. The number of staffs selected from the three categories were then put together to constitute the sample for the study.

**Table 2: Sample size on chosen categories of staff**

Category	No of staff	Sample size
Management	5	5
Senior	43	17
Junior	74	28
Total	122	50

Source: Fieldwork, 2008

**Research instrument**

The survey instruments used were questionnaires – one for customers and the other for staff members of VRA/NED. The questionnaires were employed to collect data from the customers and the staff in such a manner as to ensure anonymity of the selected respondents.

**Pilot test**

The questionnaire for customers was pilot tested on five respondents of the target population who were not part of the sample of the survey. The pilot test was intended to verify that the questions were sensible, the sequence acceptable and that the questionnaire can be completed within the time limit set by the study. The information gathered from the pilot testing also enabled the reframing of some of the questions and terms, especially those that looked somewhat technical to the respondents. The data collected so far can therefore be defended as accurate, reliable, material and consistent.

**Administering the instrument**

The researchers is a member of staff of the Upper West Area of the VRA/NED and is known to the staff and some of the customers. Administering the questionnaires was done with the aid of two research assistants. The two research assistants were introduced to the staff of the Upper West Area and the purpose of the study made known to them. The co-operation of staff was solicited with an assurance that the identities of staff selected for the study and the information they provide would be kept confidential. Personal contacts were made with selected customers and staff to administer the questionnaires to them. This was to ensure that copies get to the right respondents.

**Data analysis**

Data analysis was carried out with the aid of Statistical Product for Service Solutions (SPSS). The data collected were edited, summarized and analysed using frequency counts, tables, simple percentages and rank orders. This was intended to simplify the results of the study for easy discussion and recommendations. The information gathered were organised in tabular form in chapter four and then the results discussed.

**RESULTS AND DISCUSSION**

**Introduction**

This chapter is devoted to the description of the data collected on issues concerning customer service in the Upper West Area of VRA/NED. It focuses on the perceptions of customers of the various services provided. It also considers the type of training given to staff of VRA/NED to enable them deliver good service to customers. The research instruments used were questionnaires for both customers and staff of VRA/NED. One hundred and forty-four customer respondents out of the sampled 150 returned their questionnaires representing a response rate of 96 percent which is considered high. This became the working sample. All 50 staff respondents sampled returned their questionnaires giving a response rate of 100 percent. Data analysis is guided by research questions and study objectives. The chapter also discusses the characteristics of respondents.

**Background characteristics of customers**

Data were gathered on the demographic characteristics of customers in terms of age, gender, educational background, employment status and how long they had been in contract with VRA/NED. This was intended to determine the number of people in each demographic category.

**Age distribution of customers**

Age can have an influence on perceptions. As can be seen from Table 3, a large proportion of 95.8 percent of customers were within the age group 20 to 59. Only about 4.2 percent were 60 years old and above. The mean age of respondents was 39 years.

**Table 3: Age distribution of customers**

Age (years)	Frequency	Percent
20 – 29	31	21.5
30 – 39	53	36.8
40 – 49	34	23.6
50 – 59	20	13.9
60 - 69	6	4.2
Total	144	100

Source: Field work 2008

**Educational background of customers**

This was sought because educational background can influence the perception of respondents. Education has an influence on knowledge, skills and attitudes. Table 4 shows that 10.4 percent of respondents had junior high school or GCE Ordinary level education and below. The results also indicate that about 89.6 percent of respondents had qualification of Senior High School or above. The implication for VRA/NED is that high level of education of customers is associated with high level of awareness and customers could not be taken for granted.

**Table 4: Educational background of customers**

Educational level	Frequency	Percent
Primary/Middle	8	5.5
JHS/O’Level	7	4.9
SHS/A’Level	31	21.5
Diploma/HND	34	23.6
First Degree	44	30.6
Professional	20	13.9
Total	144	100.0

Source: Field Work 2008

**Employment status**

Employment status of customers was considered in the study because it could have an influence on the perception of service delivery. Customers in gainful employment may be in a better position to pay for services rendered to them by the VRA/NED and therefore expect nothing less than good service.

On the other hand customers without employment could have low or no income and would therefore expect that whatever amount of money they part with brings them maximum benefit.

**Table 5: Employment status of customers**

Employment status	Frequency	Percent
Unemployed	18	12.5
Employed in formal sector	98	68.0
Employed in informal sector	1	0.7
Self-employed	27	18.8
Total	144	100.0

Source: Field work 2008

Table 5 shows that about 87.5 percent of the customers interviewed were in one form of employment or the other. This is an indication that most of the customers were in a position to pay for services rendered them.

**Years of contract with VRA-NED**

The period that customers have been in contract with a service provider could influence their perceptions of the service provider. Customers who have been in contract with the service provider for a long time would have gone through the experiences of receiving services for a long time and therefore better placed to assess the services. Table 6 shows that 77 percent of respondents have been in contract with VRA/NED for six years or more.

**Table 6: No. of years customers have been in contract with VRA/NED**

Years	Frequency	Percent
1-5	33	23.0
6-10	53	36.8
11-15	30	20.8
More than 16 years	28	19.4
Total	144	100

Source: Field work 2008

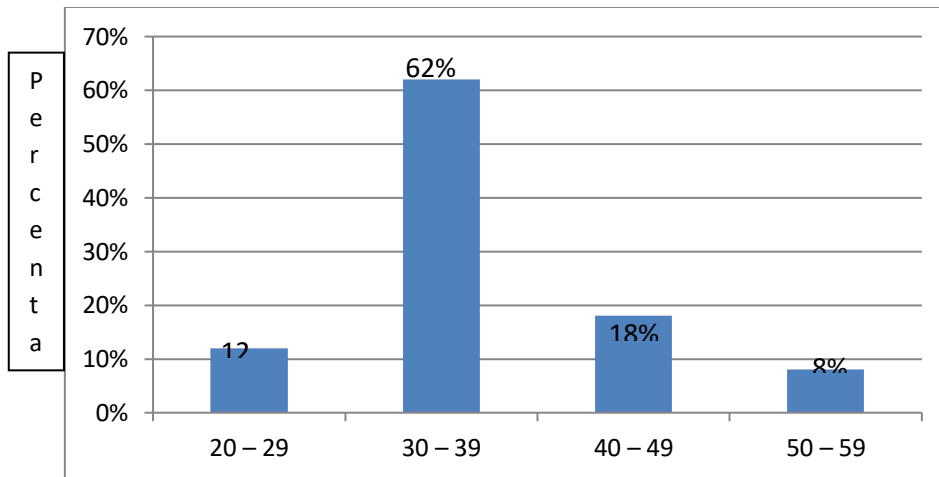
The implication is that more customers are in a position to understand the Authority’s service delivery and their perceptions could influence prospective customers. A negative publicity from any of them could influence the perceptions of others and affect the image of VRA/NED.

**Background characteristics of staff**

Data was also gathered on the demographic characteristics of staff on age, gender, educational background, and how long they have been in the employment of VRA. This was intended to determine the number of staff in each demographic category.

**Age distribution of staff**

The age distribution of members of staff of VRA/NED is presented in Figure 2.



**Figure 2: Age distribution of staff**

Source: Field work 2008

Figure 2 shows that a total of 92 percent of staff respondents were within the youthful age group 20 to 49 years. Only 8 percent were within the age group 50 – 59.

The mean age for staff was 37.

**Educational background of staff**

The educational level of staff determines their knowledge and this could have an influence on delivering service to customers.

Data collected on educational level of respondents is presented in Figure 3. The table shows that none of the staff respondents was below the Senior High School (SSSCE) or General Certificate of Education (GCE) Advance Level. About 8 percent had attained SSSCE or GCE Advance Level education, while a total of 92 percent had attained some level of tertiary or professional qualification.

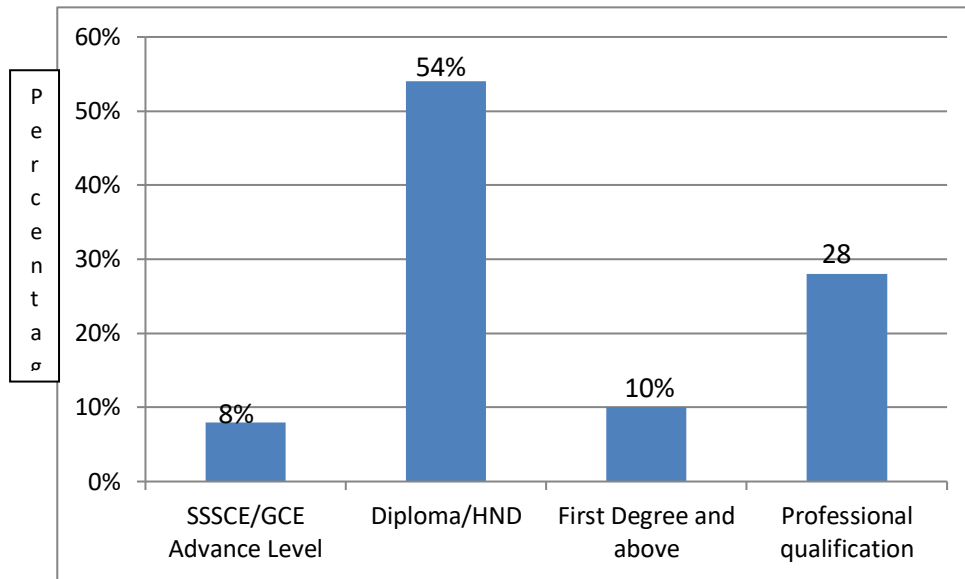


Figure 3: Educational background of staff respondents

Source: Field work, 2008

This gives an indication that most of the staff will appreciate the importance of the customer in VRA/NED’s scheme of things and the need to deliver good service.

**Length of staff employment with VRA**

Length of employment determines the amount of experience one acquires in a job and would therefore influence the way the job is performed.

The data on length of employment of staff respondents with the VRA in Figure 4 shows that 30 respondents had between 1 – 5 years of service with VRA, whilst a total of 20 had 6 or more years of service. The implication for VRA/NED is that staff with 5 years or less length of service who constitute the majority, may require more training programmes to improve their knowledge and competence levels.

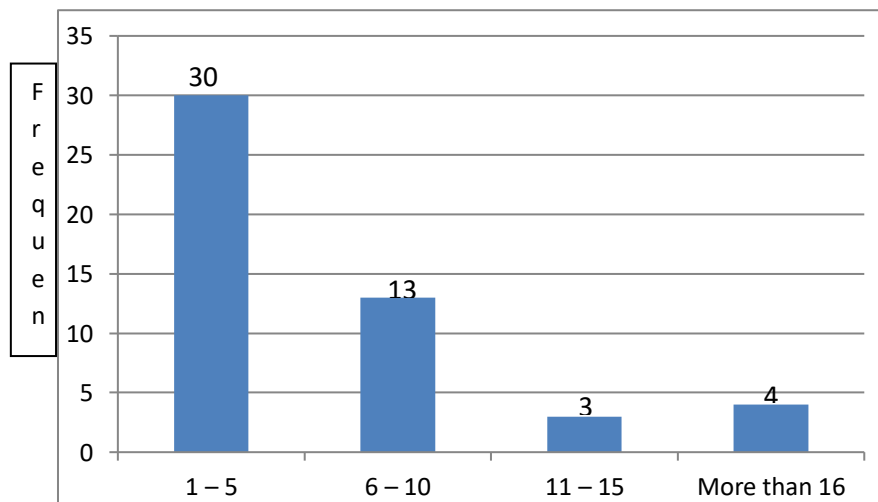


Figure 4: Length of staff employment with VRA

Source: Field work, 2008

**Gender of staff**

Gender may have influence on the way employees handle customers. It is generally perceived that females may be more gentle in handling customers than males. This may not often be the case though. Table 7 shows that about 98 percent of staff respondents were male. The implication is that the female touch may be lacking when it comes to customer service delivery in VRA/NED.

**Table 7: Gender distribution of staff**

Gender	Frequency	Percent
Male	49	98
Female	1	2
Total	50	100

Source: Field work, 2008

**Responsibility for serving customers**

Knowledge of whose responsibility it is to deliver customer service engenders teamwork which affects the organisation positively. It also indicates whether staff are adequately sensitized on the importance of customer service to the organisation. About 88 percent of staff respondents agreed it was the duty of all staff to deliver customer service while 12 percent indicated it was the duty of the customer service unit. The findings show that most staff appreciated that all staff have a contribution to make in delivering quality service to customers. This is an advantage to VRA/NED and supports Dei Tumi (2005) assertion that customer service is about attitude.

All staff interviewed agreed that the customer was very important to the business of the Authority. They all underscored the fact that the customer was the life-blood of the Authority and without the customer there would be no business for VRA. This confirms the fact that staff of VRA/NED acknowledge that the customer is so important to the organisation that without them the organisation would cease to exist. This supports the assertion by Zikmund and D’Amico (1996) that the customer is the only one who can fire everybody in the company from the chairman down, simply by spending his money elsewhere.

**Electricity related problems faced by customers of VRA/NED**

The experiences that customers go through with regard to the problems they often face with the services of a public utility Agency can influence their perception of the organisation’s services. Data gathered to ascertain which problems were most frequently faced by customers is shown in Table 8. As can be seen, 88.2 percent of respondents faced the problem of frequent unannounced power outages and power fluctuations which result in damage to customers’ appliances, 31.3 percent experienced wrong meter reading resulting in inaccurate or high bills, whilst 16.7 percent experienced late bills and wrongful disconnections. About 8.3 percent and 7.6 percent of respondents indicated late or non-response to customer complaints and late or non-reflecting of payments made respectively. The rest encountered faulty meters and difficulty in acquiring a new service or separate meter and other problems such as bad customer relations of staff and lack of education on VRA/NED operations.

The findings give an indication that frequent power cuts or fluctuations are the most frequent complaints. This is an inconvenience to customers since they cannot carryout activities which depend on electric power supply. For example, they may not be able to use their appliances such as television sets, fans, computers etc. Power fluctuations can also cause damage to customers’ electrical equipment. The implication for VRA/NED is that it is losing revenue through frequent power outages since without the flow of power to the customers, they cannot be billed. The Authority also risks being sued by customers for damage caused to their equipment. The Authority therefore needs to pay much attention to power outages.

**Table 8: Electricity related problems faced by customers of VRA/NED**

Problem type	Frequency	Percent
Frequent unannounced outages and fluctuation causing damage to gadgets	127	88.2
Wrong meter reading, inaccurate bills, high bills		
Late bills and wrongful disconnection	45	31.3
No response or delayed response to customer complaints	24	16.7
Non-reflection or late reflection of payment made	12	8.3
Difficulty in acquiring new service and separate meter	11	7.6
Faulty meter	8	5.6
Others	6	4.2
	7	4.9

Source: Field work, 2008

\*These were multiple responses

**Customers’ perception of the image of VRA/NED**

Image is an important factor in business success. A good image can take years to build, but it can be quickly tarnished by negative publicity. As shown in Table 9, about 62.5 percent of respondents thought that the public image of the Authority was good. They explained that VRA/NED was held in high esteem by the public for its exceptional services and has lived up to its corporate social responsibility by providing support to the needy in society such as donations to flood victims and provision of medical care to communities along the Volta lake. Others said the VRA/NED was doing well but needs to improve on its services.

The findings show that corporate social responsibility could influence perceptions of the organisation’s public image.

**Table 9: Customers’ perception of the image of VRA/NED**

Grading	Frequency	Percent
Excellent	5	3.5
Very good	21	14.6
Good	64	44.4
Fair	34	23.6
Poor	20	13.9
Total	144	100.0

Source: Field work 2008

The findings lend support to Kotler et al, (2005), which states that corporate image refers to the image of the organisation itself rather than of the products or services. It may be made up of the company history, financial success and stability, quality of service, industrial relations, social responsibility, etc. The public gains an instant



image of what an organisation is really like when they first come into contact with it. A strong positive image can enhance the organisation across all its operations.

About 38 percent who rated the image of the Authority as fair or poor perceived it as being monopolistic and complacent (Table 9). The implication for VRA/NED is that its image could be tarnished by negative publicity from these people. It must therefore eschew complacency.

**Customers’ perception of VRA/NED services in general**

Respondents grading of the services of VRA/NED in general is shown in Table 10. A large proportion of 66 percent considered the services provided by VRA/NED in general as good. This could be due to the influence of the perceived good image of the Authority and supports Kotler et al, (2005), which opines that a strong positive image can enhance an organisation across all its operations. It also results in people trusting it and its services.

**Table 10: Customers’ perception of VRA/NED services in general**

Grading of services	Frequency	Percent
Excellent	5	3.5
Very Good	31	21.5
Good	59	41.0
Fair	34	23.6
Poor	15	10.4
Total	144	100.0

Source: Field Work 2008

Customer satisfaction is important to sustain business as well as promote a good image of the organisation. It is crucial to ensure that customers come back, so any value that can be added in terms of customer service is a vital element in defending an organisation’s image.

A total of 34 percent of respondents were not happy with the services in general. This was attributed to the frequent unannounced power outages and delays in attending to complaints and confirms that the Authority needs to pay much attention to power outages.

**Customers’ idea of good service**

The customer’s idea of good service depends on their experiences and this could influence their perception of the service provider’s services. In most cases the customer desires the ideal situation and if it is not so they may tend to have biases towards the service provider.

Table 11 shows that 57.6 percent of respondents considered good service to be uninterrupted power supply and stable voltage, 44.4 percent considered good service to be timely response to customer demands or complaints, whilst 29.9 percent thought good service is when there is regular public education and customers are informed in the event of a problem.

About 27.8 percent saw good service as staff exhibiting good customer relations or care, and 20.1 percent considered good service to be about accurate meter readings and timely delivery of bills.

**Table 11: Customers’ views about good service**

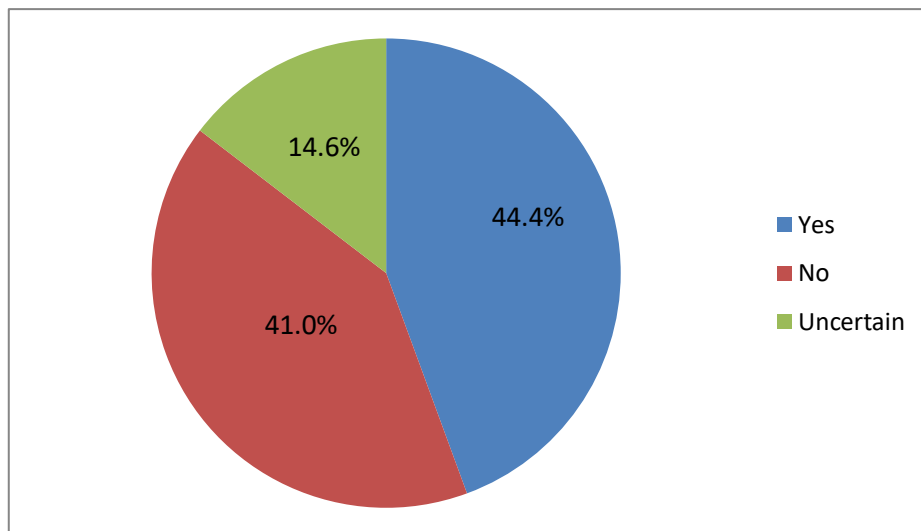
Type of service	Frequency	Percent
Uninterrupted power supply and stable voltage	83	57.6
Timely response to customer demands/complaints	64	44.4
Regular public education and keeping customers informed when there is a problem	43	29.9
Good customer relations/care	40	27.8
Accurate meter readings and timely bills	29	20.1
Others	4	2.8

Source: Field work 2008

\*These are multiple responses

The findings go to lend support to the fact that power outages and power fluctuations need to be given serious attention by the VRA/NED.

Figure 5 also shows that 44.4 percent of respondents considered services provided by VRA-NED as good while 41 percent disagreed with this claim. About 14.6 percent were not certain whether the service rendered by VRA/NED was good or not. These responses may actually be implying that the services are less than satisfactory and together with those who responded in the negative constitute 55.6 percent of respondents.



**Figure 5: Customers’ responses on whether service provided by VRA/NED is good**

Source: Field work 2008

Respondents who answered in the negative gave the reasons for the services of VRA/NED not considered good enough as frequent unannounced outages, slow response to customer demands or complaints, inaccurate and late bills, poor customer relations of staff, lack of public education and unpredictable service delivery of the Authority. These support the perception that customers are not satisfied with the services of VRA/NED.

The findings also lend credence to the assertion by Kotler et al (2005) that, customers base their choices on their perceptions of quality, value and service and will normally choose the offer that maximizes their delivered value. Therefore, companies need to understand the determinants of customer value and satisfaction. Customer satisfaction is the outcome felt by buyers who have experienced a company's performance that has fulfilled expectations. The implication for NED is that they risk losing customers to another electricity service provider that may be available.

**Customers views on aspects of VRA/NED services that need improvement**

Most respondents (97.9 percent) were of the view that customer service in VRA/NED should be improved while 2.1 percent did not agree or were uncertain whether customer service should be improved or not. Suggested areas of improvement are shown in Table 12.

**Table 12: Aspects of VRA/NED operations that need improvement**

Areas of improvement	Frequency	Percent
Attending to Complaints	54	38.3
Customer Education	53	37.6
Power Outages	53	37.6
Billing Problems	51	36.2
Customer Relations	42	29.8
New Service Connection	40	28.4
Weekend Service	18	12.8
Others	38	27.0

Source: Field Work 2008

\*These were multiple responses

The findings indicate that 38.3 percent of respondents thought that improvement was required in the area of complaints handling, 37.6 percent suggested customer education, whilst another 37.6 percent suggested improvement in power outages. About 36.2 percent suggested an improvement in the billing procedure while 29.8 percent and 28.4 percent suggested the improvement of customer relations and new service connection procedures respectively. Generally the findings show that there is the need for VRA/NED to look at all aspects of their operations and strive to improve them. This supports Hills and Alexander, (2006) on the need for organisations to improve on their customer value package.

**Adequacy of information possessed by customers about VRA/NED**

Adequacy of information that customers have of an organisation's operations has an influence on their perception of that organisation. Customers with little or no information about an organisation may perceive it in the negative light.

**Table 13: Amount of information possessed on VRA-NED operations**

Response	Frequency	Percent
Very sufficient	12	8.3
Quite sufficient	71	49.3

Uncertain	19	13.2
Quite Insufficient	26	18.1
Very Insufficient	16	11.1
Total	144	100.0

Source: Field work 2008

Customers therefore need adequate and timely information on the operations of a public utility like the VRA/NED.

As can be seen in Table 13, a large proportion of respondents (57.6 percent) had adequate information about VRA/NED operations, while a total of 42.4 percent were uncertain or did not have adequate information on the operations of the Authority.

Aspects of VRA/NED operations in which customers lacked information are shown in Table 14. The table shows that 54.9 percent of respondents lacked information on billing, 52.1 percent lacked information on the causes of power outages, whilst 39.6 percent and 36.8 percent of respondents lacked information on metering and new service procedures respectively. A proportion of 23.6 percent lacked information on public safety.

**Table 14: Aspects of VRA/NED operations in which customers lacked information**

Lack of information	Frequency	Percent
Billing	79	54.9
Power outages	75	52.1
Metering	57	39.6
New service procedures	53	36.8
Public safety	34	23.6
Others	5	3.5

Source: Field work, 2008

\*These were multiple responses

It is significant that most customer respondents lacked some information on one aspect of VRA/NED operations or another. Respondents attributed this to the fact that public education by the VRA/NED on their operations was woefully inadequate.

The findings seem not to lend credence to Manning and Reece (1997), who assert that a growing number of companies see ongoing customer education and training as a vital part of the company’s sales and service effort.

They stress that a successful company offers a variety of customized courses and education to customers who want to improve their knowledge on the activities of the company.

The findings however, do not support the fact that VRA/NED offers education to customers on a regular basis. This means the Public Relations Unit of the VRA/NED has to step up its public education drive to sensitize customers on various aspects of their operations.

Most respondents (59.7 percent) acquired information on VRA/NED through radio discussion programmes and 4.2 percent through public fora. Only 3.5 percent acquired information through VRA/NED handouts and newsletters.

This is a clear indication that public fora have not been given the needed attention. The use of radio discussion programmes is considered good but might not reach every customer since not everyone listens to such programmes.

**Handling of customers’ complaints by VRA/NED**

The way customers’ complaints are handled by a public utility also influences the perception of customers about the service provider. Table 15 shows the data gathered on the level of satisfaction of customers with the handling of complaints by VRA/NED.

**Table 15: Satisfaction level of customers with complaints handling**

Response	Frequency	Percent
Very satisfied	23	16.0
Quite satisfied	63	43.7
Neither satisfied or dissatisfied	23	16.0
Quite dissatisfied	14	9.7
Very dissatisfied	21	14.6
Total	144	100.0

Source Field work, 2008

A proportion of 59.7 percent of respondents were satisfied with the way their complaints are handled by the Authority, 16 percent were not certain whether they were satisfied or not, and 24.3 percent were dissatisfied with complaints handling. The findings show that generally, customers are satisfied with the way their complaints are handled by the Authority. But the findings also indicate that quite a number of customers were not satisfied with complaints handling, since respondents who were undecided could actually be implying they were not satisfied and, together with the dissatisfied, constituted 40.3 percent which is significant. Reasons given for the dissatisfactions expressed were the slow response to customer complaints, poor customer relations of staff and ignorance of the complaints procedure by some customers. This is indication that VRA/NED needs to do more work in the area of complaints handling.

**Knowledge of VRA/NED complaints procedure**

Knowing the procedure for customers to get their complaints or problems solved by a public utility is very important. A customer who does not know the procedure for getting complaints addressed can end up very frustrated and dissatisfied with services of the utility. This can have influence on the customer’s perception of the utility.

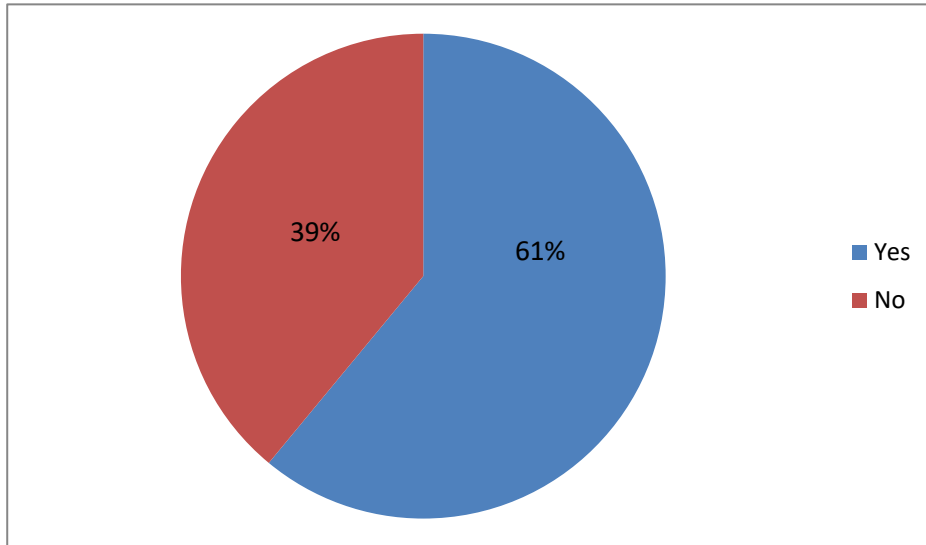


Figure 6: Customers knowledge of VRA/NED complaints procedure

Source: Field work 2008

The study however found that 61percent of customer respondents knew the procedure for reporting complaints to VRA/NED whilst 39 percent did not know the procedure (see Figure 6).

When further asked what respondents thought about the complaints procedure, 43.8 percent described the procedure as simple while 56.2 percent said it was cumbersome. The findings show that even though many customers knew the procedure for reporting complaints they found the procedure to be cumbersome.

The implication is that there could be many customers who are frustrated and therefore VRA/NED needs to simplify its complaints procedure.

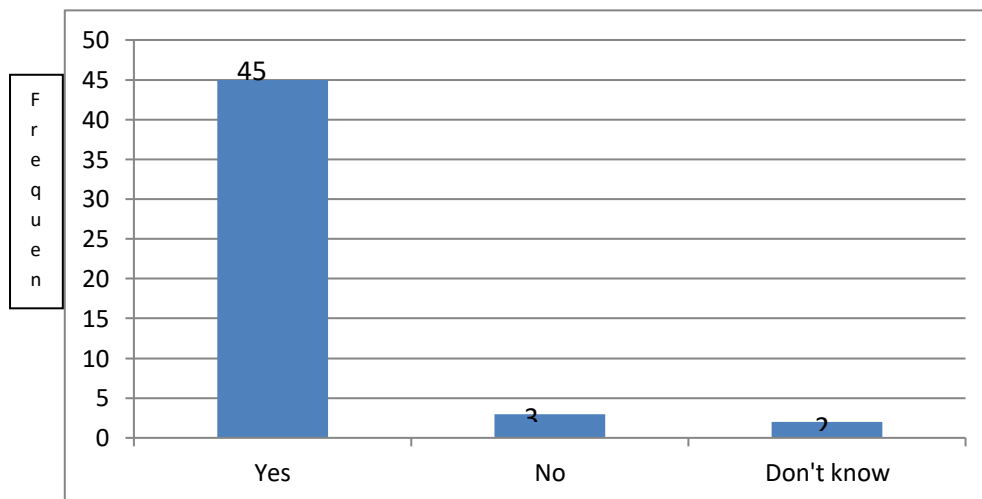


Figure 7: Staff responses whether VRA-NED has a complaints procedure

Source: Field Work 2008

Figure 7 also shows that 45 staff agreed that VRA-NED had a formal procedure for receiving and attending to customer complaints whilst a total of 5 either responded in the negative or did not know if the Authority had a formal procedure for complaints.

About 5 of the 45 respondents who agreed that NED had a formal complaints procedure in describing the procedure said complaints were first made to the front desk either verbally or by telephone where they were received and documented after which works order would be prepared and authorised by the customer services supervisor. The complaint is then referred to the appropriate section that is, commercial unit, technical unit or finance unit depending on its nature for resolution. Feedback is then given to the front desk as to whether the complaint has been successfully handled or not and the reason(s) for not being able to address it.

In describing the procedure the remaining 40 of the respondents gave all the details as above but omitted the feedback aspect. The findings show that most staff are not aware that feedback is necessary. The study noted this as a lapse in the complaints procedure.

Feedback to the office is necessary for the front desk to capture and document for records purposes whether complaints are satisfactorily handled or not and the reason(s) for not being able to handle them. This would help the organisation know if it is addressing complaints promptly or not and fashion out ways of dealing with such problems/complaints when they recur in the future. It also enables the Authority to report to the regulatory body (PURC) on how it is performing with respect to customer complaints.

From the findings it was noted that generally VRA-NED had in place a procedure for receiving and addressing the complaints or problems of customers.

**Responsiveness of staff to customers**

The smartness of personnel giving service could also influence customers’ perception. About 77.1% of customers perceived staff to be quick in attending to them while 22.9% of respondents perceived staff to be sluggish as seen in Table 16.

**Table 16: Customers’ perception of service promptness**

Response	Frequency	Percent
Very quick	38	26.4
Quite quick	73	50.7
Quite sluggish	21	14.6
Very sluggish	12	8.3
Total	144	100.0

Source: Field work 2008

Table 17 further shows that about 70 percent of customers perceived the staff to be very responsive to customers’ needs and therefore business-like in their approach to satisfy, whilst about 30 percent perceived most staff as having lukewarm attitudes towards customers and taking a long time to respond to their demands.

The implication for VRA/NED is that it stands the chance of attracting new clients. However, its image could be adversely affected as

a result of negative impressions of some customers about the attitudes of its staff.

**Table 17: Customers’ perception of staff responsiveness**

Customers’ reasons	Frequency	Percent
Staff are very responsive and business-like	81	56.2
Staff are responsive but sometimes		

constrained by resources	20	13.9
Some staff take long time to respond to customers' demands	23	16.0
Most staff have lukewarm attitude towards customers	20	13.9
Total	144	100.0

Source: Field work, 2008

**Customer relations of staff**

The way customers are received by staff of a service provider can have an influence on customers' perception of the service provider. First impressions cannot be erased easily.

As can be seen in Table 18, about 77.8 percent of customers graded staff- customer relations as good, whilst 13.9 percent graded it as fair and 8.3 percent as poor. These findings show that customers are generally satisfied with the customer relations of VRA/NED staff.

The majority of customers who rated customer relations as good explained that staff are cordial in their dealings with customers while those who rated staff customer relations as poor indicated that most staffs are aggressive and unapproachable and are always arguing with customers.

**Table 18: Customer/public relations of staff**

Response	Frequency	Percent
Excellent	16	11.1
Very good	37	25.7
Good	59	41.0
Fair	20	13.9
Poor	12	8.3
Total	144	100.0

Source: Field work, 2008

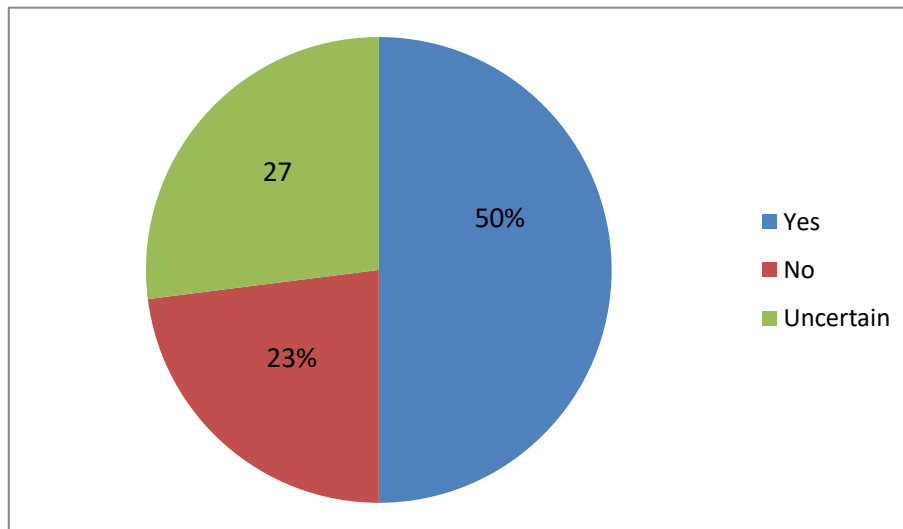
These customers could have gone through one or more unpleasant experiences at the hand of one or more members of staff and have therefore generalised all staff to be aggressive and unapproachable – a manifestation of the halo effect. This supports the notion that customers' perception of an organisation could be influenced by their experiences as observed by Mullins (2007).

All respondents indicated that they wished to be received in a warm, friendly and professional manner. This means that customers wished that staff would be helpful to them and give them assurance that their problems would be solved each time they visited VRA-NED offices. This supports the observation by Strickland (1997) that customer service is the assistance provided to help customers with the use of a product and concerns all the contacts the customer has with the organisation's employees; from the receptionist to the employee making the service connection to the customer's premises.



**Maintenance of service contract with VRA/NED**

Customers perceptions of the services of a service provider can influence their decision about continuing to do business with the organisation or not. Figure 8 shows that 50 percent of customer respondents would maintain their contract with VRA/NED today if there were another electricity service provider because VRA/NED has proven to be reliable and they liked its services. However, 50 percent were uncertain or would not maintain their contract with VRA/NED if there were another service provider, because of poor service delivery. Those who were uncertain said they would compare the services of other electricity service providers with that of VRA/NED before making a decision.



**Figure 8: Customers who would maintain their service contract with VRA/NED if there were other service providers**

Source: Field work, 2008

The findings confirm the observation of Kotler et al (2005) that, organisations that fail to deliver acceptable product and service quality will easily lose customers to competitors, since consumers are becoming more educated and demanding, and their quality expectations have been raised by the practices of superior manufacturers and retailers. Customers base their choices on their perceptions of quality, value and service and therefore companies need to understand the determinants of customer value and satisfaction. Customers will normally choose the offer that maximizes their delivered value. Customer satisfaction is the outcome felt by buyers who have experienced a company’s performance that has fulfilled expectations.

The implication for VRA/NED is that, it could lose about half of its customers if there were other service providers with better services. This could spell grave consequences for the Authority. There is therefore the need for VRA/NED to improve on its service delivery.

**Extent of staff interaction with customers**

The nature of the work determines the extent to which staff come in contact with customers, and the degree of staff contact with customers determines how seriously they take customer service issues.

Table 19 indicates that all the 50 staff come in contact with customers at one time or the other in their work. About 92 percent came in contact with customers on regular basis by receiving enquiries and complaints from customers and attending to faults on the distribution network, whilst 8 percent of staff dealt with customers occasionally when on standby duties or re-directed customers to the appropriate section for attention.

The implication for VRA/NED is that all members of staff must be given training in customer handling. The cost involved in training all staff might be high but the Authority stands to gain enormous benefits in the end. This is not to imply that there is no training at all for the staff.

**Table 19: Extent of staff interaction with customers**

Degree of interaction	Frequency	Percent
Very Frequent	37	74
Frequent	9	18
Some Extent	3	6
Occasional	1	2
Total	50	100

Source: Field work 2008

**Training offered staff to enable delivery of quality service**

Training impacts on the knowledge, skills and attitudes of staff in the performance of their work. Attitudes require time to change and the more frequent the training offered staff the better it is for the organisation. The study indicates that all 50 respondents had undergone formal training from VRA-NED to enable them deliver service to customers.

Table 20 indicates that 40 percent of staff had undergone customer care and technical training relating to their areas of specialisation while 60 percent had customer care and non-technical training relating to their areas of specialisation.

This is an indication that the VRA/NED, apart from giving training to staff in their fields of specialisation, also takes training in customer care seriously. Some staff respondents indicated they had undergone training in customer care more than once.

It can therefore be said that most or all staff of VRA/NED had been given some training in customer care in addition to training in their areas of specialisation in the past (Table 20).

**Table 20: Training undergone by staff respondents**

Type of training	Frequency	Percent
Customer care for frontline and field staff and technical training	20	40
Customer care for frontline and field staff and non-technical training for others	30	60
Total	50	100

Source: Field work, 2008

However, the findings also show in Table 21, that training in customer care had not been regular as 88 percent of staff respondents indicated they attended refresher courses in customer care only occasionally.

The implication is that the Authority could be missing the opportunity to bring its staff to be abreast with current trends in customer service delivery.

**Table 21: Regularity of customer care refresher courses for staff**

Response	Frequency	Percent
Frequently	5	10
To some Extent	9	18
Occasionally	35	70
Never	1	2
Total	50	100

Source: Field work, 2008

**Staff application of Knowledge acquired at Customer care training**

All 50 respondents agreed that the training undergone by staff had exposed them to customer care techniques.

**Table 22: Effect of training on staff respondents**

Effect of training on staff	Frequency	Percent
Identification of customer types	4	8
Management of different customer types	27	54
Improved communication with customers	7	14
Improved relations with customers	6	12
Able to anticipate customer expectations, needs, wants	6	12
Total	50	100

Source: Field work, 2008

Table 22 shows how training in customer care had affected staff. Whilst 54 percent said the training had helped them to be able to manage different types of customers, 14 percent indicated that their communication with customers had improved with training, and 24 percent had improved relationship with customers and were able to anticipate customer expectations, needs and wants. The implication for VRA/NED is that it is making a head way in its training of staff for effective service delivery and this should be continued.

The findings lend support to the assertion by Dei-Tumi (2005) that the delivery of quality customer service does not depend solely on personal skills, but that it can be improved tremendously through training and the introduction of customer service programmes as an integral part of the business training process. Customer service must be appreciated as an attitude for which training is required with motivation and committed leadership from the top, to help increase profitability.

**Difficulty in implementation of the knowledge acquired from training**

Implementation of knowledge gained can be affected by several factors which can either enhance its application or hinder it. From Figure 9, it can be seen that 31 staff did not have difficulty in implementing the knowledge acquired. However, 19 respondents had difficulty implementing the knowledge acquired. This was attributed to the lack of motivation as a result of inadequate logistics such as distribution materials (cables, energy meters, poles

etc) for connecting customers and undertaking rehabilitation of the networks, inadequate transport, tools and equipment and lack of financial incentives and recognition.

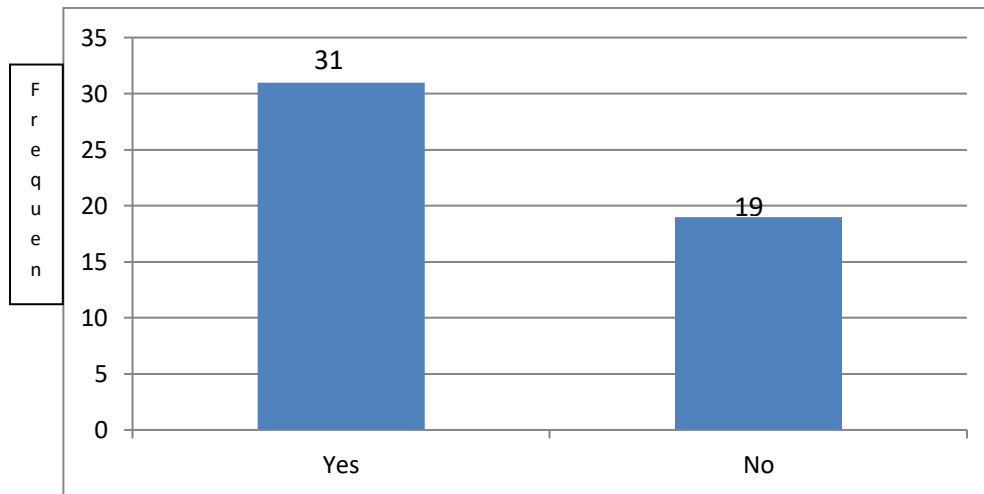


Figure 9: Difficulty in Implementation of knowledge acquired by staff

Source: Field work 2008

This is an indication that the Authority needs to provide adequate logistics for staff to work and also institute incentive packages for staff who deal with customers.

Respondents who had no difficulty in implementing what they learnt at the customer care course indicated that their attitude and customer relationships had improved and they now could go the extra mile in satisfying customers. This confirms that training in customer care has benefited staff of VRA/NED and supports the opinion of Dei-Tumi, (2005) that training is very essential for good customer service delivery.

**Staff motivation**

Motivation influences performance and staff will give of their best if the organisation has incentives to motivate staff to deliver quality service to customers. As can be seen from Table 23, about 58 percent of respondents said no incentives were provided staff by the Authority as motivation for delivering service, 26 percent were given annual bonus, overtime and standby allowances, while 12 percent got their motivation from seeing the customer satisfied.

Table 23: Type of incentives provided staff to motivate them

Response	Frequency	Percent
Financial incentives (bonus and allowances)	13	26
Motivated when customers are satisfied	6	12
Improved logistics	2	4
No incentives provided	29	58
Total	50	100

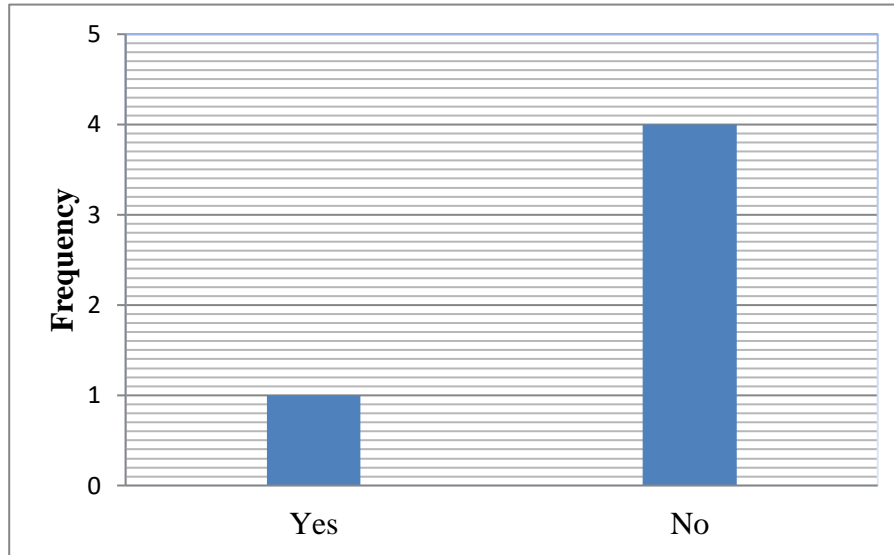
Source: Field work, 2008

The findings show that apart from the statutory financial incentives like annual bonus, overtime and standby allowances which are enjoyed by all staff who work outside normal hours, no other financial incentives are provided staff especially frontline staff to encourage them to deliver quality customer service.

The authority therefore needs to introduce some special incentive packages to encourage competition among staff who serves customers. This would go a long way to improve customer service.

**Analysing customer complaints**

Analysing customer complaints offers the opportunity to know customers’ problems and the reason(s) why certain types of problems occur frequently. This provides a basis for service improvement to customers.



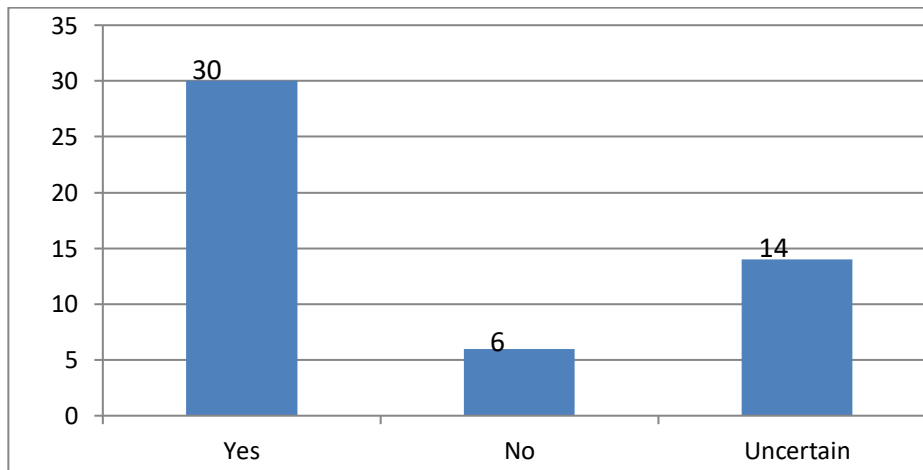
**Fig 10: Management response on analyses of customer complaints**

Source: Field work, 2008

As shown in Figure 10, four management staff out of five disagreed that conscious efforts were made to study customer complaints for service improvement whilst one management staff said complaints were periodically analysed. The implication for VRA/NED is that it could be missing a fine opportunity to improve on service delivery by not periodically analysing complaints. All five management staff however agreed that customer service issues were discussed at management meetings frequently.

**VRA/NED customers’ charter**

A Customers Charter states what level of service customers should expect from a service provider and clearly defines the rights of the customer with regard to a service provider.



**Figure 11: Staff responses on whether VRA/NED has a customers’ charter**

Source: Field work, 2008

As can be seen in Figure 11, 30 respondents agreed NED has a Customers charter while 6 respondents disagreed. The remaining 14 respondents were uncertain.

Figure 12 also shows that only 19 respondents were conversant with the Customers Charter of VRA/NED. The remaining 31 were not conversant with the Charter. This situation is worrying since about 62 percent of staff may not know what the customers expected from them because they were not conversant with the Charter. This has the potential of impacting negatively on the services rendered to customers, particularly with regard to promptness of responses to customer demands. Some respondents indicated that a Customers Charter for NED was drafted but had not been approved or gazetted. The study finds this as the reason why majority of staff are not conversant with the charter.

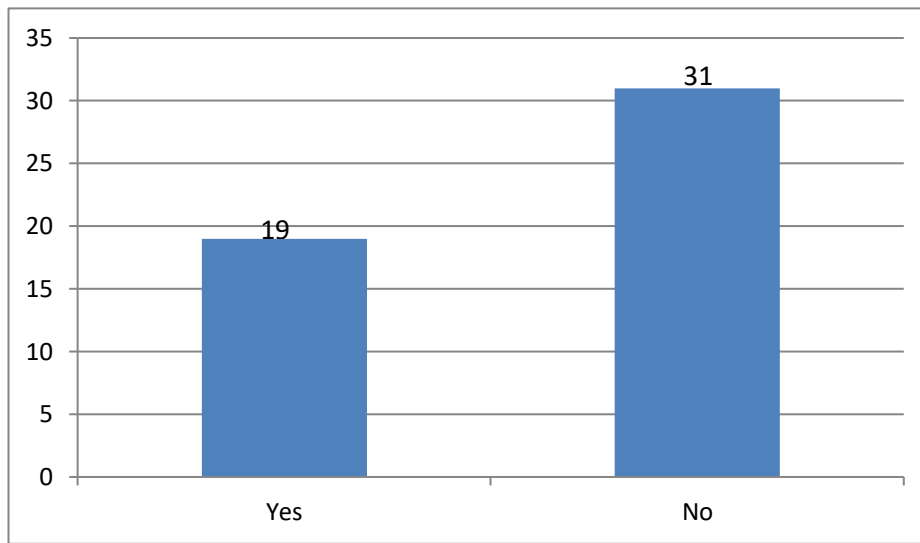


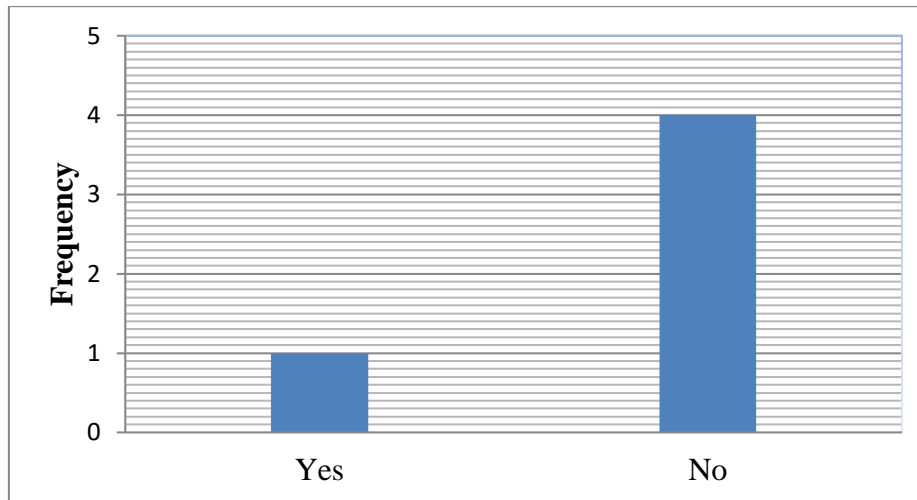
Figure 12: Staff who are conversant with the customers' charter

Source: Field work, 2008

Respondents who were ignorant of the customers' charter described the situation as unfortunate because one needed to know what customers' expectations were before trying to satisfy them. Staff should therefore be conversant with the charter since it deals with best practices. They suggested that VRA/NED should develop one and staff be educated on it because they could be embarrassed if customers discovered that staff were ignorant of the charter.

**Customer research**

A service provider must periodically undertake customer research or surveys to ascertain what customers think of its services and whether the service provider is meeting the expectations of customers. This will enable the service provider to re-strategise to meet the changing business environment. An organisation that does not engage in periodic customer research may make wrong assumptions about the customer and risk losing market to its competitors.



**Fig 13: Management response on whether VRA/NED undertakes customer research**

Source: Field work, 2008

Figure 13 shows that one management staff agreed that the organisation occasionally undertakes customer research, while the other four management staff disagreed explaining that conscious research had not been given the deserved attention. The study observed that customer research had not been given the needed attention by VRA/NED since during the survey of customers most customer respondents were found to lack information on the operations of VRA/NED.

The non-conducting of customer research/survey means that VRA/NED might not have enough information about customers' needs and wants and therefore customers' requirements might not be met. This is at variance with the observation of Zikmund and D'Amico (1996), that companies are awash with information about their customers, and that smart companies capture information at every possible customer touch point including customer purchases, service and support calls, satisfaction surveys and market research studies. Meeting customer requirement involves offering them quality and satisfactory services through quality goods/services and good customer relationship.

Some customers and staff respondents lauded the survey being undertaken and suggested VRA-NED should undertake more of such to know what customers are thinking about their services.

### Summary

The study set out to analyse customers' perceptions of the services of the Volta River Authority in the Upper West Area of the Northern Electricity Department. Specifically the idea was to determine customers' general perceptions of the VRA/NED with respect to the services it provides and the level of satisfaction of customers with the services. It also examined the complaints procedures of VRA/NED, ascertained whether customers also knew of the procedure, what the feedback from customers was, and whether it could help fashion out strategies for service improvement.

The study used a descriptive survey design. Cluster technique was used to select one service center out of seven for interview. A census was used to select the only one customer in the special load tariff (SLT) category. Stratified sampling and proportional representation was used to determine the number of respondents to select from the residential and non-residential categories of customers. The simple random sampling technique was used to select individuals from the two categories for interview. Thus a total of 150 customers were sampled for study. The study also evaluated the training offered to the staff of VRA/NED in customer care and how they applied the ability in their work. A census procedure was used to select five management staff for the study. Stratified sampling and proportional representation was applied to determine the number of staff respondents to select from the senior and junior staff categories. These were then randomly sampled for the exercise. In the end a total of 50 staff respondents were obtained for the study. Both primary and secondary data were used to complement

each other. Data analysis was facilitated by the use of the Statistical Product for Service Solutions (SPSS). The main findings of the study are;

- Customers perceive the public image of VRA as high and its services are also perceived good and majority of customers would maintain their service contract with VRA/NED today, if there were another electricity service provider.
- Customers are generally satisfied with the services of VRA/NED in the areas of complaints handling and customer relations. But customers are not satisfied with other aspects of VRA/NED's operations such as frequent and unexplained power outages and power fluctuations, late and inaccurate billing, wrongful disconnections, lack of public education and inadequate information to customers.
- VRA/NED has a complaints procedure in place and customers know the procedure but consider it cumbersome. Staff are unaware of or ignore feedback to the complaints desk after resolving customers' complaints.
- VRA/NED needs to improve its services in areas such as response to customer complaints, customer relations, public education, new service connections, power outages, billing and weekend service. Feedback on problems frequently faced by customers such as power outages and fluctuations should be analysed regularly by VRA/NED to serve as basis for improvement.
- Customers lack information on almost all aspects of VRA/NED's operations. The Authority's public relations/communication machinery has not done well regarding public education. The public relations unit does not engage in regular public education to sensitize customers on VRA/NED's activities. All the 144 valid respondents lacked some information on the operations of the Authority.
- Most staffs of VRA/NED have undergone some training in customer care in addition to training in their areas of specialisation and this training in customer care has impacted positively on the attitude of staff and their delivery of service to customers. Training in customer care is however, not regular. The inadequate logistics situation of VRA/NED is also hampering staffs in the application of knowledge acquired during training.
- VRA/NED does not provide special incentives to staff as a motivation to deliver quality service.
- VRA/NED does not have a Customers Charter and the Authority does not engage in periodic customer surveys/research to ascertain what customers perceive of their services.

## Conclusions

It is evident from the study that customers generally perceive the public image and services of the Authority to be good. But improvement is required in some aspects of the Authority's activities such as public education, customer survey/research and frequency of power outages. The Authority needs to do a lot of work in these areas if it is to survive in the future since the time of competition has arrived and VRA is aware of this.

From the findings it is noted that VRA/NED has in place a procedure for receiving and addressing the complaints or problems of customers. About 61% of customers know the procedure for reporting complaints to VRA/NED. But most customers found the procedure to be cumbersome. About 58.2 percent of customers are satisfied with complaints handling by the VRA/NED while 41.7 percent are dissatisfied with complaints handling by NED.

Most of the staff are not aware that feedback is required during complaints resolution. The study noted this as a lapse in the complaints procedure. Feedback to the office is necessary for the front desk to capture and document for records purposes whether the complaint was satisfactorily handled or not and the reason(s) for not being able to handle it. This would help the organisation know if it is addressing complaints promptly or not and fashion out ways of dealing with such problems/complaints when they recur in future. It also enables the Authority to report to the regulatory body like the PURC on how it is performing with respect to customer complaints. Staff should be educated that feedback to the front desk and customers is necessary in complaints handling and resolution.

Most staff of VRA/NED have been given some training in customer care in addition to training in their areas of specialization. But training in customer care is not regular. This needs to be improved. Staff need to attend regular refresher courses in customer care to keep abreast with modern trends in service delivery.



VRA/NED has no approved Customers Charter. Only 38 percent of the total staff respondents were conversant with the Customer Charter of VRA/NED. The study finds this situation to be bad because how would staff know what the customer expects from them if they are not conversant with the Customers Charter? This has the potential of impacting negatively on the services rendered to customers particularly with regards to promptness of responses to customer demands. Indeed one management staff confirmed that a customer charter for VRA/NED was drafted but has not been gazetted or given accent. The study finds this to be the reason why majority of staff are not conversant with the Charter.

### Recommendations

From the findings of the study, the following recommendations are made:

- The Chief Executive of VRA should ensure that the Authority invests in new equipment to minimise the frequency of power outages to customers.
- The Authority should take steps to get stakeholders and customers to understand how the VRA works. The Public Relations Unit of VRA should institute regular interactions with the public to educate them on the Authority's operations to win the confidence of customers. Radio/TV discussion programmes, together with public fora where the Authority comes face-to-face with members of the public, could serve as the best means to reach out to customers and the general public. This will ensure that customers are adequately informed at all times and also erase or reduce negative perceptions about the Authority.
- VRA/NED should consider making its complaints procedure simple and customer-friendly. Staff should also be educated on it to be able to provide feedback if required in order to determine how well the Authority is doing and what actions should be taken to improve service delivery generally.
- The Director of Human Resources who is responsible for training should ensure that the frequency of training courses in customer care is increased or maintained by the Authority. Training impacts on the attitudes of staff and attitudes take time to change. Frequent training will also ensure that staffs are abreast with modern trends in customer service delivery. The deregulation of the electricity supply industry will result in the emergence of new power suppliers and, as stated in the literature review, an organisation can only win the competition that will arise if it brings its customer service onto a higher pedestal in line with modern trends.
- A special incentive package should be instituted by the Chief Executive of the Authority to motivate staff to pay more attention to customers. For example, an award package could be instituted for the best staff in customer service to be competed for on a yearly basis in order to motivate staff in delivering quality service. A system could be found to involve customers in the selection of the best staff in each year. Many more staff should be given the opportunity to serve the customer. In this era of competition the business of serving the customer should not be left to a few individuals in VRA/NED. As the literature review makes clear, serving the customer is about positive attitude, and staff of VRA/NED needs to develop this attitude for the Authority to succeed.
- Steps should be taken by the Director of VRA/NED to have a gazetted Customers Charter which should be displayed for customers to be aware of the level of service delivery to expect from the utility. Staff should also be educated on what customers expect from the Authority. The Authority should also engage in periodic customer surveys to ascertain what customers perceive of its services.

### REFERENCES

1. Abnory, M. M. (2001). *Human relations in Ghanaian organisations*, Cape Coast: Hampton Press.
2. Argyris, C. (1960). *Understanding organisational behaviour*, Tavistock: Dorsey Press.
3. Armstrong, M. (2006). *A handbook of human resource management practice*, London: Kogan Page Limited.
4. Brehm, S. S., & Kassin, S. M. (1990). *Social psychology*. Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company.
5. Commercial Manager's Memorandum (2006). *Re-organisation of front desk* (NEHO/610/0271/2005) January 23.
6. Daily Graphic of January 20, 2006: Page 28.
7. Dei-Tumi, E. (2005). *Customer service is attitude, not a department*, Accra: Wisdom Centre International.
8. Drucker, P. (1974). *Management tasks: Responsibilities and practices*, New York: Linacre House.
9. Heider, F. (1958). *The psychology of interpersonal relationships*. New York: Wiley

10. Hill, N., & Alexander, J. (2006). *Handbook of customer satisfaction*, New Delhi: Infinity Books.
11. James, R., & Sells, S. B. (1981). Psychological climate theoretical perspectives and empirical research. In D Magnusson (ed) *Towards psychology of situations: An international Perspective*, Hillsdale: Erlbaum.
12. Kelley, H. H. (1967). Attribution theory in social psychology, in D Levine (ed), *Nebraska symposium on motivation*, Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press.
13. Kotler, P., Armstrong, G., Saunders, J. & Wong V. (2002). *Principles of marketing*. Essex: Pearson Education Limited.
14. Kotler, P., Fahey, L., & Jatusripitak, S. (2005). *Principles of marketing*. Pinto: Mateu-Cromo Artes Graficas.
15. Leedy, P. D. (1989). *Practical research: Planning and design*. New York: Macmillan Publishing Company.
16. Manning G. L., & Reece B. L. (1997). *Selling today*. 7<sup>th</sup> ed., USA: CIP.
17. McGregor, D. C. (1960). *The human side of enterprise*. London: McGraw-Hill.
18. Mitchel, M., & Jolley, J. (1996). *Research design explained*. Fort Worth: Harcourt Brace.
19. Morgan, R. M., & Hunt, S. D. (1994). *The commitment – Trust theory of relationship marketing*. American Marketing Association.
20. Mullins, L. J. (2007). *Management and organisational behaviour*. Essex: Pearson Education Limited.
21. Patton, M. Q. (1980). *Qualitative evaluation and research methods*, California: SAGE Publications.
22. Shepherd, D. (2003). *International rural development*. Berkshire: University of Reading.
23. Strickland, T. (1997). *Strategic management*. Jefferson City: Von Hoffmann Press.
24. The Mirror of Thursday, April 9, 2009: Page 33.
25. Training and Development Manual of VRA (2001)
26. VRA-NED Operations Document- 2009
27. Zaltman, G., & Wallendorf, M. (1983). *Consumer behaviour: Basic findings and management*, New York: Wiley.
28. Zikmund, G. W. (1991). *Exploring marketing research*. Chicago: Dryden Press.
29. Zikmund, G. W. (2007). *Exploring marketing research*, Cincinnati: Thomson/South-Western.
30. Zikmund, G. W. & D'Amico, M. (1996). *Marketing*, New York: West Publishing.