THE SERVICE IMPERATIVE*

Mary Jo Bitner, Stephen W. Brown

This essay captures much of our current thinking regarding the compelling global need to focus energy around service research, service science, service innovation, and service education.

Services dominate the world’s established economies such as the U.S., Germany and Finland and are becoming increasingly important in developing economies including China and India. Yet most companies, national governments, and universities do not put much energy into service research, innovation or education. This ironic juxtaposition of facts has led us, along with others, to promote a focus on service research and service innovation across companies and institutions. We call this the “service imperative.” In this essay we present our view of the service imperative as a burning platform that is giving birth to many hopeful directions for the future of the global economy. We believe that companies, nations, and individuals who embrace the service imperative will prosper and benefit. We also believe that widespread embracing of the service imperative can lead to improved quality of life for individuals worldwide.

The “service imperative” that we develop and explain in the paper is immediate and applies to individuals, companies, and countries. It has both a “crisis orientation” as well as a “future optimism” component to it. The crisis is for companies and countries that must see their way to be competitive and survive in this new world of services. It is also a crisis for academic institutions that must develop the right kind of educational foundations and skills for students who will live their lives and develop their multiple careers in this new world. The “future optimism” is that if companies, countries, and institutions rally around services growth and competition, we will all benefit and, importantly, we feel individual quality of life globally will be enhanced through service(s).

Some of the lessons already learned by highly successful service businesses are captured in the paper. We conclude with striking implications for companies, universities, and governments.

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A META-ANALYSIS OF SERVICES QUALITY RELATIONSHIPS*

Amy Ostrom, Stephen W. Brown, Steven Brown, Sou Lam

Over the last fifteen years, research on service quality has grown extensively and substantively. The topic has attracted interest among managers and researchers because of the substantial effects customer perceptions of service quality have on the satisfaction and loyalty of customers, as well as on brand equity. Service quality research has also achieved a truly global scope and significance and attracted contributions from scholars from many disciplines. Even though a number of methodological issues have been debated, the preponderance of research has been strongly influenced by the conceptual model of service quality proposed by Parasuraman et al. (1985) and subsequently operationalized and refined by the same authors (e.g., Parasuraman, Zeithaml, and Berry 1988, 1991). This articulation of the service quality construct and its associated SERVQUAL measure has spawned hundreds of studies around the world, over 70% coming from outside the United States. It has contributed to a rich empirical record that has yet to be synthesized using meta-analytic techniques.

The research derives from an extensive project that began by gathering over 500 service quality articles. Articles were coded by two researchers and then included in a meta-analysis if they contained any of the following metrics: mean levels of customer expectations, performance perceptions, or gaps between expectations and performance perceptions, correlations linking service quality to other related constructs, intercorrelations among the five SERVQUAL dimensions, or consumers’ importance ratings of the SERVQUAL dimensions. The data was analyzed by means of a nested, multi-level modeling procedure using the HLM program.

Although based upon sophisticated meta-analysis, our intent is to present the fascinating and far-reaching results of this work with both a research and a managerial emphasis. After briefly laying out the objectives, global scope and methods of our study, we devote the bulk of our attention to sharing the results and what they mean for management and for future research. This includes sharing how results vary by regions of the world, service industry context (banking or medical services, for example) and how the studies were conducted. These factors help explain the variance we are discovering in levels of expectations, perceptions, and gaps as well as strength of relationships across the hundreds of studies.

*An article based on this research is under review.
DELIVERING EXCELLENT SERVICE: LESSONS FROM THE BEST FIRMS

Stephen W. Brown, Robert Ford, Cherrill Heaton

Delivering excellent service is a challenge for most organizations. While many aspire to it, the evidence from customer satisfaction surveys indicates that too few firms are able to deliver service excellence. On the other hand, some organizations consistently deliver excellent service. This article* reviews ten lessons these benchmark service organizations have learned and shows how these organizations use them to meet and exceed the ever-rising expectations of their customers. These lessons can be emulated by any organization seeking such excellence.

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MANDATING A SERVICES REVOLUTION FOR MARKETING*

Stephen W. Brown, Mary Jo Bitner

Enlightened firms and services researchers have been performing and studying marketing for years in ways quite different from the traditional perspective of many marketing scholars. In advocating a revolutionary change in the discipline, we offer six insights supported by research that can provide a foundation for a service-dominant contemporary marketing. The insights come in part from observations and work we have done with member companies of the Center for Services Leadership at Arizona State University. The essay concludes with pragmatic recommendations for furthering in a services revolution in marketing, including a) get far closer to our laboratory, b) accept that customer are not the sole province of marketers, c) become knowledgeable of other business disciplines and d) work aggressively to reorient marketing curricula.

This paper traces the evolution and current state of services science within business schools and highlights trends that will shape trans-disciplinary research and services curricula in the future. Research and education related to services management have a long history in business schools, dating back to the early 1980s. Driven by demand from the business community at that time, a core group of scholars worldwide have, based on foundational research, developed managerial frameworks, tools, and strategies specifically for service organizations. Textbooks, curricula at all levels, research journals, and international conferences focused on services management have evolved to support this discipline which is grounded in multiple business fields, specifically in marketing, human resource management, and operations. Today we see an explosion of interest in services research and education coming from many directions including the business disciplines, but also expanding into engineering and computer science. As leaders of Arizona State University’s Center for Services Leadership, we are in a unique position to paint a picture of the evolution of the services discipline and its role in business education. The CSL has existed at ASU since 1985 and currently has over forty member firms who are devoted to being on the cutting edge of thought leadership related to competing through service. Through our unique lens we are able to project a picture of emerging topics and issues developing in the discipline as a result of current global business challenges.

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