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Reviews the literature relating to both theoretical and practitioner-based studies.

Defining and Measuring the Quality of Customer Service

Barbara R. Lewis and Vincent W. Mitchell

Introduction

The role of service quality as an indicator of customer satisfaction and organisational performance is now widely acknowledged and has led to a major research thrust in recent years. In this article, the authors give initial attention to the growing importance of customer service and service quality, and consider the frequently used terms: "expectations", "satisfaction", and "quality". Discussion is then focused on the existence of service quality gaps and the various dimensions or determinants of service quality which have been postulated and researched by both academics and practitioners. A number of service quality studies are cited, and the most well-known service quality measurement tool, SERVQUAL, is presented together with discussion of its limitations — and suggestions for improvement.

Customer Service and Service Quality

Customer service within service industries continues to gain in importance. Consumers are becoming more aware of the alternatives on offer, and rising standards of service,

prompted by competitive trends, have increased customers' expectations (see, for example, Leonard and Sasser, 1982; Takeuchi and Quelch, 1983). In addition, customers are becoming increasingly critical of the quality of service they experience (Albrecht and Zemke, 1985). Expectations are desires or wants of consumers — what they feel a service product should offer — which are formed on the basis of previous experience with a company and its marketing mix inputs which include physical evidence, process and people (Booms and Bitner, 1981). The physical environment comprises facilitating goods and tangible clues which may be essential or peripheral to the service being bought; process refers to service delivery systems; and "people" comprise those service personnel (both customer-contact and back-room) who are integral to the production of a service.

Management too are much more aware of the consumers' needs and advances in technology have enabled organisations to facilitate the customer-company exchange at the point of contact, e.g. using ATMs and EFTPOS. Also, increasingly sophisticated marketing/management information systems have allowed management to implement some customer orientated ideas which would have been near impossible ten years ago, e.g. customer databases.

As a consequence of these trends, together with an increasingly competitive environment in most service industries, many organisations consider the quality of service they provide to be a critical factor in achieving a differential advantage over their competitors. Leonard and Sasser (1982) claim that "quality has become a major strategic variable in the battle for market share". This is echoed by Berry *et al.* (1989) who believe that service excellence is a key strategic weapon. Thus, quality is often a key variable in strategic planning and organisations which are becoming leaders in quality service are characterised by the commitment of top management and a corporate culture that encourages a consumer and quality focus throughout the company.

Service Encounters

Before moving on to define service quality, mention should be made of the notion of the "service encounter", also referred to as "moments of truth" or "critical incidents" (see, for example, Albrecht and Zemke, 1985). A service encounter is the interaction between a service organisation and its customers/clients, and may take varying forms: face-to-face, over the telephone, by letter, or by automated means (e.g. ATM). Every time a customer comes into contact with any aspect of the organisation he/she has an opportunity to form an impression of the service provided. A characteristic of most service provision is the simultaneous production and consumption which necessitates

interpersonal interaction between an organisation's employees and its customers: such encounters typically have a high "impact" on the consumer and the quality of the service encounter is thus a vital ingredient in the overall quality of service experienced by the customer. Recent perspectives and research activities relating to service encounters are reported by Bitner, 1990; Bitner *et al.*, 1990; Larsson, 1990; and Lewis and Entwistle, 1990.

Defining Service Quality

Although it is now well accepted that service quality is important for corporate strategy and planning, there are no clear cut definitions of quality. Many of the suggested definitions focus on meeting customer needs and requirements. For example, Lewis and Booms (1983) believe that service quality is a measure of how well the service level delivered matches customers' expectations. Creedon (1988) says his own corporate objective is "to meet or exceed our customers' expectations", and "providing a better service than the customer expects" was a comment from a recent study in the banking sector (Lewis, 1988). Additionally, a number of definitions refer to comparisons by consumers of expectations of service with their perceptions of actual service performance (e.g. Gronroos, 1982; Berry *et al.*, 1985; 1988).

The term "expectations", as used in service quality literature, differs from the way it is used in the consumer satisfaction literature. In the satisfaction literature, expectations are viewed as "predictions" made by the customer about what is likely to happen during an impending transaction. According to Oliver (1981, p. 33): "It is generally agreed that expectations are consumer-defined probabilities of the occurrence of positive and negative events if the consumer engages in 'some behaviour'". In contrast, in the service quality literature, expectations are viewed as desires or wants of consumers, i.e. what they feel a service provider should offer rather than would offer. The consumers' expectations or wants will be influenced by past experience. It has been found that, if expectations are held constant, higher levels of performance lead to higher evaluations (Oliver, 1977). One then has a situation where if expectations are greater than performance, the perceived quality is less than satisfactory. That is not to say the service is of low quality. The tautology exists that if expectations are greater than performance, for example in an expensive restaurant, then although perceived quality may be low, the actual standard of service, in absolute terms will still be higher than in a cheap restaurant. This tautology adds confusion to any discussion of good or bad service quality using an expectation versus performance model.

The difference between quality and satisfaction has also been a point for debate. Oliver (1981, p. 27) defines

satisfaction as being a "summary psychological state resulting when the emotion surrounding disconfirmed expectations is coupled with the consumer's prior feeling about the consumption experience". Almost all definitions of satisfaction relate to a specific transaction, while an attitude towards a product is a much more enduring characteristic and is less situationally orientated. In Oliver's (1981) words, "satisfaction soon decays into one's overall attitude toward purchasing products". Consistent with the distinction between satisfaction and attitude is a distinction between service quality and satisfaction: perceived service quality is a global judgement, or attitude, relating to the service, whereas satisfaction is related to a specific transaction (Parasuraman *et al.*, 1988). In fact, Parasuraman *et al.* (1985) have reported several illustrations of instances where respondents were satisfied with a specific service, but did not feel that the service was of high quality.

Quality Gaps and Dimensions

Parasuraman *et al.* (1985) defined the quality perceived in a service to be a function of the gap between consumers' expectations of the service and their perceptions of the actual service delivered by the organisation, and suggested that this gap is influenced by several other discrepancies or gaps which may occur within the organisation. Their research among company executives led to the identification of four key gaps/shortfalls:

- (1) Management's perceptions of both internal and external customer expectations are different from actual customer desires, i.e. managers do not necessarily know what customers want and expect from the company.
- (2) Actual service quality specifications are different from management's perceptions of customer expectations, i.e. even if consumer needs are known, appropriate specifications of service may not always be set, possibly because of lack of resources, organisational constraints or an absence of management commitment to a service culture and service quality.
- (3) The service that is delivered is different from management's specifications for service, i.e. guidelines may be set, but high quality may not be certain due to (for example) variations in performance of contact personnel: employees not being able or willing to perform at a desired level.
- (4) What is said about the service in external communications is different from the service that is delivered. External communications such as advertising and promotion can influence consumers' expectations and perceptions of the delivered service and so it is important not to promise more than can be delivered.

The most important gap to consider is that perceived by the consumer, Gap 5, i.e. the difference between expectations and perceptions of actual service; but what are the factors on which consumers evaluate the service offering?

Dimensions

Three dimensions of service quality have been proposed by Sasser *et al.* (1978). These are levels of material, facilities and personnel. Implied in this trichotomy is the notion that service quality involves more than just the outcome, it also involves the manner in which the service is delivered. This idea has been reiterated in other work. Gronroos (1982, 1984), for example, postulated that two dimensions exist: the technical quality of the outcome of the service encounter which involves what the customer is actually receiving from the service; and the functional quality of the process itself, which involves the way in which the service is delivered and is concerned with the psychological interaction between buyer and seller. These two dimensions come together to influence the corporate image of the organisation.

Lehtinen and Lehtinen (1982) suggest that “corporate image/quality” is a dimension in its own right. They refer to three quality dimensions: physical quality, which includes the physical aspects of the service (e.g. equipment or buildings); corporate quality, which involves the company’s image or profile; and interactive quality, which derives from the interaction between contact personnel and customers as well as between customers themselves. Lehtinen and Lehtinen also divide service quality into process quality — judged by consumers during the service, and output quality — judged by the consumer after the service is performed.

More recently, LeBlanc and Nguyen (1988) have suggested that corporate image, internal organisation, physical support of the service producing system, staff-customer interaction, and degree of customer satisfaction all contribute to service quality. Further, Edvardsson *et al.* (1989) present four aspects of quality that affect customers’ perceptions:

- Technical quality — to include skills of service personnel and the design of the service system.
- Integrative quality — the ease with which different portions of the service delivery system work together.
- Functional quality — to include all aspects of the manner in which the service is delivered to the customer, to include style, environment and availability.
- Outcome quality — whether or not the actual service product meets both service standards or specifications and customer needs/expectations.

However, possibly the most widely reported set of service quality determinants is that of Parasuraman *et al.* (1985). They suggested that the criteria used by consumers that are important in moulding their expectations and perceptions of delivered service fit ten dimensions: tangibles, reliability, responsiveness, communication, credibility, security, courtesy, competence, understanding/knowing the customer, and access. Subsequent factor analysis and testing led to these ten dimensions being condensed to five (Parasuraman *et al.*, 1988):

- Tangibles — physical facilities, equipment, appearance of contact personnel.
- Reliability — ability to perform the promised service dependably and accurately.
- Responsiveness — willingness to help customers and to provide a prompt service.
- Assurance — knowledge and courtesy of employees and their ability to inspire trust and confidence.
- Empathy — caring, individualised attention the company provides its customers.

In addition, to these five determinants of service quality, Gronroos (1990) has added a sixth dimension, that of recovery.

In developing the research pertaining to the determinants of service quality, a significant contribution has been made recently by Johnston *et al.* (1990). Following investigation of the measures of quality used by a number of large UK service organisations they developed a set of 12 determinants of service quality: reliability, responsiveness, appearance/aesthetics, cleanliness/tidiness, comfort, friendliness, communication, courtesy, competence, access, availability and security. This research team has also carried out an empirical investigation (Silvestro, 1990) focused on 15 service quality factors which were categorised as either hygiene, enhancing or dual threshold factors. Hygiene factors are those factors which are expected by the customer, and failure to deliver will cause dissatisfaction. Enhancing factors are those factors, the delivery of which will lead to customer satisfaction but failure to deliver will not necessarily cause dissatisfaction. Dual threshold factors are those which are expected by the customer: failure to deliver will cause dissatisfaction, and delivery above a certain level will enhance customers’ perceptions of service and lead to satisfaction.

Service Quality Studies

The determinants and dimensions of service quality have been the focus of a multitude of both academic- and practitioner-based studies, and a variety of measurement tools to assess service quality have been utilised. One

of the first reported studies was that of Gagne (1967) who developed a Student Perceptions of Teachers (SPOT) test, which measured the quality of teaching by comparing what actually happened against some expected ideal. This was subsequently used by a number of institutions (see Bradbury and Ramsden, 1975). Transport companies involved in service quality programmes and assessment include British Airways (Hamill and Davies, 1986), British Rail (Gilbin, 1986), and London Underground (Davison, 1987). In the health care sector, a substantive study was completed by Thompson (1983) in which he investigated a wide range of determinants of patient satisfaction; and doctors have been studied by Brown and Swartz (1989).

A variety of studies have emerged in the financial services sector where organisations are actively promoting customer care/service quality programmes. Buswell (1983) reported the experience of a bank which measured the quality of service received by its customers in relation to knowledge of staff, communications, staff expertise, willingness to lend and branch design. Richardson and Robinson (1986), Tansuhaj *et al.* (1987), and Cornish (1988) also assessed a range of technical and functional aspects of quality, and Lewis (1989) researched four sets of service quality factors: physical features and facilities, reliability, personal characteristics of staff, and responsiveness. Credit card companies were the focus of work by Larkin (1987) and Garfein (1988), and insurance companies have been investigated by Marshall (1985) and Falzon (1988). Other documented illustrations are those of Touzin (1986) — Sheraton hotels; and Blout (1988) — AT&T.

Two final examples relate to services and their business clients. Smith (1989, 1990) carried out research among small businesses to identify those elements which determine the quality of bank service to small business clients and the perceived performance of the banks across these elements: and some of her findings are presented in her article in this issue. Finally, Morgan has a particular interest in professional services and in his article in this special issue he presents findings from a study relating to the needs, attitudes and satisfactions/quality perceptions of organisational clients with respect to their legal advisers.

The studies reported here are wide ranging in terms of the industries and organisations studied, and also disparate with regard to research objectives, methods and measurement tools. Indeed, a number are reports of a particular company's experiences, whilst others are substantive empirical and analytical investigations. However, service quality and its measurement is a common theme.

Service Quality Measurement

To return to the work of Parasuraman *et al.* (1988) and the challenge of developing methods to assess accurately

the service quality gaps (1-5) which they described. They proposed a measurement instrument containing 22 statements developed from their five major dimensions of service quality (tangibles, reliability, responsiveness, assurance and empathy).

Each statement is recast into two statements — one to measure expectations about firms in general within the service category being investigated, and the other to measure perceptions about the particular firm whose service quality is being assessed. Approximately half of the statements are worded positively and the rest are worded negatively, in accordance with recommended procedures for scale development (Churchill, 1979). A seven-point scale ranging from "strongly agree" (7) to "strongly disagree" (1), with no verbal labels for scale points 2 to 6, accompanies each statement. Scale values need to be revised for negatively worded statements prior to data analysis. Examples of questions are:

E1 They *should* have up-to-date equipment:

| | |
|-----------------------|----------------|
| Strongly disagree | Strongly agree |
| 1 2 3 4 5 | 6 7 |

P1 Company X *has* up-to-date equipment:

| | |
|-----------------------|----------------|
| Strongly disagree | Strongly agree |
| 1 2 3 4 5 | 6 7 |

The quality perception or gap (Q) is calculated by subtracting the Expected scale values (E) from the Performance scale values (P). Therefore, $Q = P - E$. Addition of each individual item's Q value gives an overall quality value, which can be positive, i.e. performance is better than expected, or negative, i.e. performance is worse than expected. Substantial time and effort has been put into developing the 22-item scale to establish both its reliability and validity. The final product, SERVQUAL (see Parasuraman *et al.*, 1988) is a concise multiple-item scale with good reliability that can be used to understand better service expectations and consumer perceptions. One can look at trends over time or compare branches/outlets within an organisation. It gives an indication of the relative importance of the five dimensions which influence customers' overall quality perceptions. With this information priority areas can be targeted for management's attention and resources. Another application of the instrument is its use in categorising a firm's customers into several perceived-quality segments (e.g. high, medium and low) on the basis of their individual SERVQUAL scores. These segments can then be analysed on the basis of demographic, psychographic and/or other profiles.

The quality of these ideas depends critically on the accuracy of the measurement instrument. While SERVQUAL is seemingly a ready-made solution to the assessment of a service organisation's performance, are

there any other ways of obtaining the same information? What problems might a manager using SERVQUAL face? In the final section of this article the suggestion is made that although SERVQUAL can be treated as an off-the-shelf solution, a number of improvements are possible.

Improving the Measurement of Service Quality

The first point to note is that SERVQUAL treats all items in the scale as equally important. This assumption may not hold in every situation. For example, is the fact that the organisation has up-to-date equipment as important as the organisation being dependable? Whilst the "should" question of expectation will provide an indication of the relative importance of the item to the individual, the gap measurement is no more or less heavily weighted as a result of that information. Therefore, a difference of one scale point on the statement concerning up-to-date equipment is treated exactly the same as a one point scale difference on the dependability statement. The writers suggest that some form of weighting of gaps needs to be introduced if the scales are accurately to reflect the magnitude of gaps.

Second, when administering the scales to consumers, difficulties have been found as a result of half of the statements being negatively worded. Consumers become confused when presented with double negative questions. For example: "The bank manager does not take time to discuss my business", strongly agree or disagree. If given time to work out the logic then consumers will make the correct responses, but with a minimum of 44 scales, half of which are seemingly repeated, respondent interest may wane resulting in completion errors (Smith, 1990).

The two separate lists of statements for the same items lead to additional drawbacks. Respondents may be initially unsure about the exact difference between the two statements, especially about the meaning of the word "should" because of the change of definition of expectation used in the service quality literature. They may also have difficulty in remembering to rate companies in general as opposed to rating what they want or expect from that particular company. Therefore, constant reinforcement of the points is needed if meaningful data are to be collected. Further, because the statements are rated at different times, consumers forget how they have rated expectations when completing their performance statements. To have independent ratings may initially appear to be beneficial. On closer examination, however, it is exactly opposite to what is being sought, i.e. a comparison between some general expectation/want and one company's performance on a given item. Comparing the two at the same time must surely give a more accurate reflection of the gap in the consumer's mind. To summarise, negative statements and the word "should" cause confusion, and independent ratings are suggested to be less accurate than comparisons made at almost the same point in time.

Third, restricting consumers' responses to a seven-point scale may mask subtle variation in their expectations and

perceptions. For example, the consumer may feel his expectation lies somewhere between points 5 and 6 on the scale, probably just closer to 6. Six will then be recorded as the measurement, whereas in fact a more accurate figure would have been 5.6. On his/her performance rating the respondent may feel the rating should be between 6 and 7. If it is slightly closer to 6, then 6 will be recorded as the response, whereas his/her true feelings were measured by the point 6.4 on the scale. The recorded measurements will then show no difference between expectations and performance. However, in truth the difference may have been as much as 0.8 which represents some 11 per cent of the whole scale. If this is a particularly important item, ignoring such a mismatch is done at the researcher's peril.

To solve this problem, a graphic scale could be used to measure these points more accurately. However, this would not be without its costs in data processing terms. While values of 1-7 are easily noted and input into a data set, graphic scales, unless they can be optically scanned, must be measured by hand and then input. This increases the time required for data processing as well as the accuracy of the measurement.

If a graphic scale were to be used, it would give additional validity to the use of parametric statistics. It is common practice to use ordinal scales, such as the 1-7 agree/disagree scale, as interval data (Albaum *et al.*, 1977) even though strictly these tests are inappropriate. The use of a graphic scale provides the opportunity to measure the responses on a continuous interval scale which does not violate the assumption of parametric statistics, which one would wish to use on such data once collected.

A final problem relates to the adjectives used in SERVQUAL statements. These adjectives are crucial in the measurement of perceptions, for they provide the point of reference for the statement with which the respondent can agree or disagree. The problem lies in how much one can express positive or negative feelings about the statement. Presumably, if one strongly disagrees that a firm provides "up-to-date" equipment then one is indicating that they do not, but how out-of-date is it — a few years out-of-date or is it antiquated? Similarly, if one strongly agrees that the firm provides up-to-date equipment, does up-to-date include futuristic equipment or equipment which may be seen as before its time?

As can be seen, the choice of adjective is crucial. Yet even the choice of an extreme adjective suffers from the limitations of an agree/disagree scale to fully allow the consumer to indicate extreme opposite viewpoints. One way to overcome this problem is to use bipolar semantic differential scales, for example:

Antiquated equipment _____ Futuristic equipment

which will allow respondents a greater freedom of expression. Nevertheless semantic differentials have disadvantages, in particular:

- bipolar words need to be found for each item; this may prove difficult and time consuming;
- the scales may be more difficult for consumers to complete and the questionnaire may require several examples and training questions at the beginning.

To overcome the problems highlighted with the SERVQUAL measurement tool, researchers might consider the use of a bipolar semantic differential graphic scale. This approach to alter and improve rating scales is referred to as the upgraded semantic differential or the graphic positioning scale (Evans, 1980; Swan and Futrell, 1980). For example, a typical question might be:

Indicate using a "P" how up-to-date the equipment of company X is. On the same scale, using a "W", indicate how up-to-date you want or expect equipment of companies within this industry to be.

Antiquated W P Futuristic

Apart from overcoming some of the disadvantages already discussed, this approach reduces the length of the questionnaire and is quicker to complete. In addition, it forces the respondent to place on paper a pictorial representation of the distance between expected and perceived performance. Because both are considered simultaneously and the consumer has a point of reference, once the performance value (*P*) has been assigned, the accuracy of the gap measurement should be increased.

In addition, the problem of the "should" confusion is reduced by using "want" and there are no double negatives. The amount of the gap (*Q*) between (*W*) and (*P*) is then weighted by the value of (*W*); since (*W*) is an indication of the importance of the item to the consumer. Therefore $Q = (W - P) W$. Thus, the sum of $Q_1 - Q_{22}$, i.e. the weighted gaps for all the 22 items, would seem to provide a more accurate indicator of the customer's service quality perceptions.

Conclusions

It is hoped that the review of literature presented in this article, relating to both theoretical and practitioner-based studies, has provided the reader with a flavour of some of the current service quality issues.

The importance of quality service is now well accepted, and service-based organisations are addressing increasing attention to service excellence in their corporate strategy and planning, in the anticipation of achieving a differential advantage over their competitors.

The determinants or dimensions of quality service are wide ranging and measurement schemes and tools are continually being developed. The "key challenge for researchers...to devise methods to measure service quality gaps accurately" (Parasuraman *et al.*, 1985, p. 49) is also well acknowledged.

The most widely adopted instrument used to assess

service quality, the SERVQUAL questionnaire, has been presented together with a number of observations concerning its limitations. Several modifications and potential improvements to this measurement procedure have been suggested but the proposed new method has not yet been tested or shown to provide more accurate data in empirical studies. The challenge for the authors and other researchers is to carry out such tests and experiments. But, in the meantime, SERVQUAL remains the most reliable tool available for the measurement of service quality in the 1990s.

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