MANAGING SERVICE QUALITY – SERVQUAL METHOD: STRENGTHS AND WEAKNESSES

Monika Kozerska

University of Czestochowa

Abstract: In this paper I give a short overview about measuring service quality. For services, the assessment of quality is made during the service delivery process, I which usually takes place with an encounter between a customer and a service contact person. Customer satisfaction with service quality can be defined by comparing perceptions of service received with expectations of service desired.

Key words: service quality, gaps model, Servqual

Service with a smile used to be enough to satisfy most customers, but now some service firms are differentiating themselves in the marketplace by offering a "service guarantee". Unlike a product warranty, which promises to repair or replace the faulty item, service guarantees typically offer the dissatisfied customer a refund, a discount, or free service.

1. Defining service quality

Service quality is a complex topic, as seen by the need for a definition containing five dimensions: reliability, responsiveness, assurance, empathy, and tangibles. Using these dimensions, the concept of a service quality gap is introduced; it is based on the difference between a customer's expectations of a service and the perceptions of the service as delivered. A survey instrument that measures service quality, called SERVQUAL, is based on implementing the service quality gap concept. Definitions of the dimensions are as follows[1]:

- *Reliability*- is the ability to perform service dependably and accurately. Reliable service performance is a customer expectation and means that the service, every time, is accomplished on time, in the same manner, and without errors. For example-, receiving mail at approximately the same time each day is important to most people. Reliability extends into the back office, where accuracy in billing and record keeping is expected.
- *Responsiveness*- is the willingness to help customers and provide prompt service. Keeping customers waiting, particularly for no apparent reason, creates unnecessary negative perceptions of quality. In the event of a service failure, the ability to recover quickly with professionalism can create very positive perceptions of quality. For example, serving complimentary drinks on a delayed flight can turn a potentially poor customer experience into one that is remembered favorably.
- *Assurance*- is the knowledge and courtesy of employees and their ability to convey trust and confidence. The assurance dimension includes the following features: competence to perform the service, politeness and respect for the customer. effective

communication with the customer, and the general attitude that the server has the customer's best interests at heart.
- *Empathy*- is the caring, individualized attention the institution provides its customers. Empathy includes the following features: approachability, sense of security, and the effort to understand the customer's needs.
- *Tangibles*- is the appearance of physical facilities, equipment, personnel, and communication materials. The condition of the physical surroundings is tangible evidence of the care and attention to details exhibited by the service provider. This assessment dimension can extend to the conduct of other customers in the service. such as a noisy guest in the next room at a hotel.

Customers use the five dimensions described above to form their judgments d service quality, which are based on a comparison of expected service and perceived service. The gap between expected service and perceived service is a measure o service quality; satisfaction is either negative or positive [10].

2. Gaps model

In parallel with their identification of the dimensions of service quality, authors Parasuraman, Zeithaml and Berry [5] postulated the major causes of the perceived service quality "gap" (figure 1); that is, the gap between consumer expectations and perceptions. They specified four potential causes of this gap, which they labelled as Gap 5.First, service providers need to ensure that management appreciate exactly what service attributes are valued by their customers and in what order. A restaurant manager, for example, may believe that customers' evaluation of the quality of the service is influenced primarily by the decor in the restaurant, and that the quality of the food and the attitude of employees towards staff are of little significance. If this is incorrect, decisions could be made about service design and delivery which could significantly affect the customers' evaluation about the quality being provided. This gap they labelled as Gap 1; that is, the gap between customers' expectations and management perception of customers' expectations.
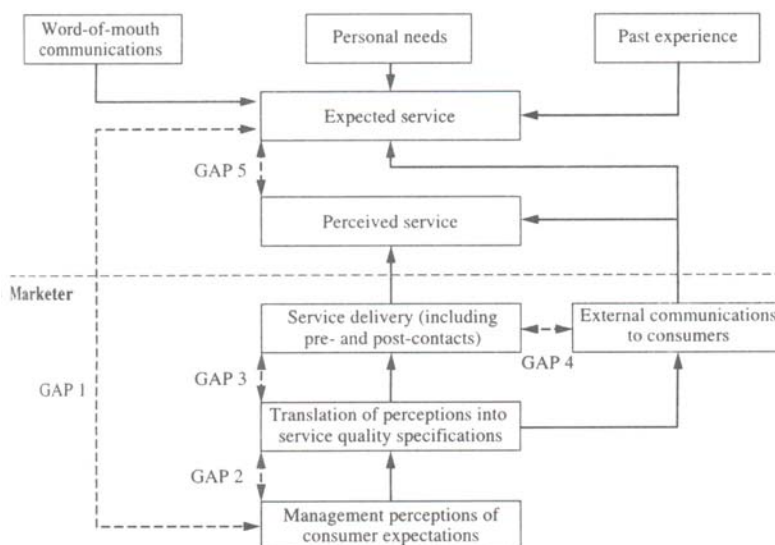

Figure 1. Service quality gap model [5]

Even if management fully appreciate the attributes valued by customers, they are often unwilling, unable or simply do not care enough to put resources into solving the problem. For example, even though operators of theme parks recognise that the consumers' evaluation of the quality of their experience at the theme park is negatively influenced by the length of time they are forced to spend waiting in a queue for a ride, little has been done by the operators to alleviate the situation. This gap they labelled as Gap 2; that is, the gap between management perception of customers' expectations and service quality specifications.

The research also highlighted a problem that related specifically to service delivery. Even if quality standards are correctly set in accordance with an accurate reading of customer expectations, service quality could still be substandard because of deficiencies that relate to the attitude and manner of contact employees. Employees, for example, may not have been given adequate training and support to carry out the tasks required, or they may not be aware of exactly what they are expected to do. This gap they labelled as Gap 3; that is, the gap between service quality specifications and actual service deliver.

Another problem occurs when organisations promise that they will deliver one level or type of service but in reality deliver something different. This has been termed the 'promises' gap and can easily occur if an actual service experience, at say a retail store, does not reflect the implicit or explicit promises conveyed by a television advertisement. This gap they labelled as Gap 4; that is, the gap between service delivery and external communications to the customer [2].

For many service organisations, one way of closing Gap 4 is to try to develop a strong service brand. As with product branding, the strength of a service brand depends on the extent to which the brand conveys a consistent, positive and clear message to consumers about what is being offered. This is clearly a more difficult task for service organisations given the primarily intangible nature of the offer and the reliance on variable employee interactions to convey brand messages. In theory, a clear brand should help to differentiate the service offered from the competition.

In essence, Gaps 1, 2, 3 and 4 contribute to the essential gap, Gap 5, the gap between consumer expectations and perceptions; the measure of perceived service quality. The Gaps model has, therefore, understandably resulted in 'follow up' research into the understanding of the antecedents of consumer expectations, and into methods of reducing Gaps 1 to 4[9].

3. Conceptual and methodological problems with Servqual scale

The Servqual research instrument was placed in the public domain by PZB and, not surprisingly, it has been used by many researchers since its publication. These researchers, through attempting to measure service quality in a variety of service sectors, have identified some conceptual and methodological problems with the Servqual scale.

Servqual strengths and weaknesses[6]:

- It is claimed that Servqual dimensions are not generic; that is, the applicability of the Servqual scale to different service settings is questioned. In, for example, office equipment businesses, carrier services, and retailing, it was found to be difficult to apply Servqual meaning fully.
- The timing of expectation measurements is of crucial importance. To use Servqual implies that respondents must rate their expectations (on a scale of 1 = strongly disagree to 7 = strongly agree) and also their perceptions of a particular service, on the same scale, for each of 22 statements. Perhaps, in an ideal world, the bank customer, for example, could be interviewed before taking out an account with the bank (to assess expectations) and interviewed again three months later (to assess perceptions of the actual service). In practice this maybe impossible. For very good practical reasons,

respondents are often interviewed only once (after the service experience) and asked to rate both their expectations and their perceptions on that one occasion.

- If the gap between perceptions (P) and expectations (E) is used literally, that is, P-E, then Teas (taking expectations to be equivalent to an ideal standard) claims that increasing P-E scores do not reflect continually increasing levels of perceived quality. That is, a higher P-E score does not necessarily imply higher quality. Take, for example, the situation where an ideal standard corresponded to a score of six, and a customer rated E and P each at six. The P-E score is nil. If, for pragmatic or pessimistic reasons, a customer gives an E rating of one, and then a P rating of two to a service in the same sector, the P-E score is one. Is the latter of higher perceived service quality than the former?

By 1995, these and other conceptual and methodological reservations with Servqual had been well documented. Nevertheless, Servqual-based studies have dominated the empirical services quality research into the twenty-first century, and there is little doubt that the instrument gives a convenient "kick-start" to practitioners and academics seeking to measure and monitor perceived service quality [8].

Summary

Issues of service quality and customer satisfaction lie at the heart of services marketing and management. Much of the qualitative work on understanding service quality, which produced the determinants, and then the five dimensions, of service quality, has informed academics and practitioners alike. Similarly, the "Gaps model", which provides the basis for measurement of service quality has been of value as an academic framework, and as a justification for the SERVQUAL format. SERVQUAL and the operationalisation of expectation measurements have been subjects of concern for researchers into service quality, but the methodology is still extensively employed.

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