Service Quality for Customers' Satisfaction: A Literature Review

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Abstract. Service quality is a very important component in any business-related activity. This is especially so, to marketer a customer's evaluation of service quality and the resulting level of satisfaction are perceived to affect bottom line measures of business success (Lacobucci et al., 1994). Customer expectations are beliefs about a service that serve as standards against which service performance is judged (Zrithaml et al., 1993); which customer thinks a service provider should offer, rather than on what might be on offer (Parasuram et al., 1988).

Keywords: Service Quality, Customer Satisfaction, Service Delivery, Quality Management

Introduction

Customer satisfaction does not only express a happy customer, but rather complex than that. Customer satisfaction is actually a term most widely used in the business and commerce industry. It is a business term explaining about a measurement of the kind of products and services provided by a company to meet its customer's expectation. To some, this may be seen as the company's key performance indicator (KPI).

In a competitive marketplace where businesses compete for customers, customer satisfaction is seen as a key differentiator and increasingly has become a key element of business strategy. There is a substantial body of empirical literature that establishes the benefits of customer satisfaction for firms. It is well established that satisfied customers are key to long-term business success (Kristensen et al., 1992; Zeithami et al., 1996; McColl-Kennedy & Scheider, 2000). It also defined as a global issue that affects all organizations, regardless of its size, whether profit or non-profit, local or multi-national. Companies that have a more satisfied customer base also experience higher economic returns (Bolton, 1998; Yeung et al., 2002).

Consequently, higher customer satisfaction leads to greater customer loyalty (Yi, 1991; Anderson & Sulivan, 1993; Boulding et al., 1993) which in turn leads to higher future revenue (Fornell, 1992; Bolton, 1998). For that matter, many market leaders are found to be highly superior-customer-service orientated. They have been rewarded with high revenue and customer retention as well. For that matter, organizations in the same market sector are compelled to assess the quality of the services that they provide in order to attract and retain their customers. Apparently, many researchers conceptualize customer satisfaction as an individual's feeling of pleasure (or disappointment) resulting from comparing the perceived performance or outcome in relation to the expectation (Oliver, 1981; Brandy & Robertson, 2001; Lovelock, Patterson & Walker, 2001).

There are two general conceptualizations of satisfaction here, namely, the transaction-specific satisfaction and the cumulative satisfaction (Boulding et al., 1993; Jones and Suh, 2000; Yi and La, 2004). Transaction-specific satisfaction is the customer's very own evaluation of his or her experience and reaction towards a particular service encounter (Cronii & Taylor, 1992; Boshoff & Gray, 2004).

This reaction is expressed by the customer who experiences a product or service for the first time. Meanwhile, cumulative satisfaction refers to the customer's overall evaluation of the consumption experience to date (Johnson, Anderson & Fornell, 1995); an own accumulation of contacts with services provided them from day-to-day. It is from this accumulation that customers establish a personal standard which is used to gauge service quality. However, in general, it is agreed that customer satisfaction measurement is a post-consumption assessment by the user, about the products or services gained (Churchill & Surprenant, 1982; Yuksel & Rimmington, 1988).

Service Quality

To some, service quality can also be defined as the difference between customer's expectations for the service encounter and the perceptions of the service received. According to the service quality theory (Oliver, 1980), it is predicted that customers will judge that quality as ` low` if performance does not meet their expectations and quality as `high` when performance exceeds expectations. Closing this gap might require toning down the expectations or heightening the perception of what has actually been received by the customer (Parasuraman et al., 1985). According to Gronroos (1982), perceived quality of a given service is the result of an evaluation process since consumers often make comparison between the services, they concluded that the quality of service is dependent on two variables: Expected service and Perceived service. Quality spells superiority or excellence (Taylor and Baker, 1994) (Zeithaml, 1988), or, as the consumer's overall impression of the relative inferiority / superiority of the organization and its services (Bitner & Hubbert, 1994; Keiningham et al., 1994-95). Consumer behavioral intentions are also influenced by the standards of service quality (Bitner, 1990; Cronin & Taylor, 1992, 1994; Choi et al., 2004).

McDougall and Levesque Service Quality Model

This model describes customer satisfaction in service settings. This model states that perceived service quality and value influence customer satisfaction which in turn affect the future intensions. Where perceived service quality consists of two dimensions as described earlier, Core, the basic service (as promised) and relational (the way service is delivered). In addition to service quality dimensions Tangibles, Empathy, Responsiveness, Reliability and Assurance that customers use to judge or evaluate overall services (Parasuraman et al., 1985) the core and relational quality leads to overall customer satisfaction or service quality (Zeithaml et al., 1996).

Perceived value is defined as "benefits received relative to cost". Customers who think that they got something worth spending are better satisfied as compare to those customers who think that did not get something worth spending (money) (Zeithaml et al., 1988). Customer retention/loyalty that results in repeated transactions is the main goal of service providers as their profit and revenues are linked with it, increased in customer retention and level of satisfaction generate positive word of mouth, more revenues and reduce the marketing cost for the company's Reichheld (1996) and Heskett et al. (1997). So it can be said that the overall assessment of service provider is viewed in terms of customer satisfaction and future intensions and the customer interests of returning back to the same service provider.

Findings of this research model show that characteristics or nature of service affects the drivers of customer's intensions and level of satisfaction. So there is a need to develop better understanding about the relative importance of drivers of satisfaction in the service context and how the service characteristics will affect these drivers. However these drivers cannot be generalized when considering a specific service. By determining the influence of such drivers, service providers can focus more on the ways of improving those drivers that can improve the customer satisfaction which ultimately leads to improved sales.

Figure 1. McDougall & Levesque (2000) Customer Satisfaction with Service Quality Model

Satisfaction and Delivery of Service

Faculty and Students satisfaction refers to the attraction, pride, or positive feeling that the faculty and students develop toward the program or institution (Danielson, 1998; Hatcher, et al., 1992). Strike (1984) indicated that the level of faculty and students' positive feeling or satisfaction is associated with faculty and students' being able to find adequate resources to meet their academic and social interests. The faculty and students' ability to project and implement their self-concepts or viewing themselves as part of the institution is also related to their positive feeling of satisfaction (Sedlacek, 1987; Stikes, 1984).

The faculty and students' positive feeling and satisfaction is also contingent to the academic and social experiences obtained at the particular institution (Aitken, 1982; Betz, Menne, Starr, & Klingensmith, 1971; Danielson, 1998; Hatcher, et al., 1992; Stikes 1984; Tinto, 1993). The academic and social experiences of students are the vehicles that drive students into the life of the institution (Tinto, 1993). In his Interaction theory into argues that student persistence can be predicted by their degree of integration. He refers to two kinds of integration; academic and social integration. Academic integration refers to how students perform academically (grades) and social integration is how the students interact with faculty (Suhre, Jansen, & Harskamp, 2006).

Previous studies have shown that faculty most especially students who report positive academic and social experiences expressed greater satisfaction with their overall college experience (Bailey et al., 1998; Danielson, 1998; Tinto, 1993). Other key determinants of student satisfaction include academic performance, quality of curriculum, quality of instruction, and quality of academic advising, student satisfaction with major, and the level of isolation felt by the student (Aitken, 1982). Interaction between faculty members and students is also a factor affecting student satisfaction in their academic experiences (Allen, 1987; Betz, et al., 1971; Love, 1993; Tinto, 1993).

This implies that sufficient and positive faculty-student interaction will contribute to overall student satisfaction (Danielson, 1998; Nettles, et al., 1986; Tinto, 1993). Interaction with fellow students is also associated with student satisfaction (Aitken, 1982).

Effect of Service Quality on Customer Satisfaction

To obtain products and service a consumer spends both money and resources in the form of time, energy and effort (Zeithaml et al., 1988). Service or product quality and customer satisfaction both have long been considered crucial for success and survival in today's competitive market. But it is also important to understand what contributes to customer satisfaction that could be a key to achieve competitive advantage.

Consumers are now demanding higher quality in products than ever before (Leonard & Sasser, 1982). The search for quality is arguably the most important consumer trend of the 1980s (Rabin, 1983). The important feature of service firms is to focus on quality, the way it is produced and being offered to the final customer. It is seen that continuous improvements in the quality of services perceived according to the consumer expectations positively affects the satisfaction level and customer's perceptions about the company.

However, it is worth noting that there are several distinct conceptualizations of quality. Just as current quality is expected to have a positive influence on overall customer satisfaction (Anderson et al., 1994). So, we can say that, the effect of expectations of quality on customer satisfaction is positive and significant (Anderson et al., 1994). Delivering quality service is considered an essential strategy for success and survival in today's competitive environment (Dawkins & Reichheld, 1990). The primary emphasis of both academic and managerial effort focused on determining what service quality meant to customers (Zeithaml et al., 1996).

Service quality is a determinant of whether a customer ultimately remains with or defects from a company (Zeithaml et al., 1996). In marketing management literature service quality takes a prominent position. It is usually defined as customer's impression of relative inferiority or superiority of service provide and its service. Also, it is often considered similar to overall attitude of customer towards company.

It is also observed that the increased interest in service quality by the firms is due to the fact that service quality is proved to be beneficial to maintain bottom line performance of the firm. Both Service quality and Customer satisfaction terms is being widely used by researchers interchangeably (Sureshchandar et al., 2002).

Studies show that the overall experience with the service quality results in customer satisfaction which leads to customer loyalty. Where the overall service quality (as perceived) is viewed as a combination of core and relational aspects. In the service literature, core and relational quality are the most basic elements of services. Where core is "what is delivered" and relational is "how it is delivered" (McDougall & Levesque, 1992, 2000).

Relationship between Service Quality and Customer Satisfaction

In marketing theory, the consumer satisfaction category has the main position. It is based on the premise that the profit is made through the process of satisfaction of consumers' demands (Dubrovski, 2001). A further debate has considered whether service quality is a cause customer of satisfaction (Cronin & Taylor, 1992; Parasuraman et al., 1985). It then helps to identify a link between both constructs.

The Increased level of customer satisfaction, decreases the chances that customers will be pointing the flaws in the quality (Anderson et al., 1997). In service settings it would offer a better perspective of the relative importance of service quality determinants by developing more comprehensive models of the drivers of customer satisfaction (Anderson et al., 1997). A great similarity between the customer satisfaction and service quality is observed, however researchers are careful to say that these two are different concepts (Spreng and Singh, 1993; Oliva, Oliver, & MacMillan, 1992).

In academics both constructs are recognized as distinct and independent (Oliver, 1980). Whereas a wide literature study shows that both concepts are distinct conceptually but also are closely related to each other (Parasuraman et al., 1994; Shemwell et al., 1998) and any increase in one (quality) leads to increase in another (satisfaction) (Sureshchandar et al., 2002). However, there are number of variations found in literature between service quality and customer satisfaction. Cronin and Taylor (1994), Boulten and Drew (1991) stated that satisfaction is customer decision after an experience while quality is not.

According to Cronin and Taylor (1992) it is important to have this distinction between the two concepts for managers and academics, as there is a greater need to understand either the firm's objective is to perform in a way that satisfies the customers or they should strive to provide maximum level of service quality perceived by its customers.

There are researchers like Hurley and Estelami (1998) who states that that service quality and satisfaction are distinct constructs, and there is a causal relationship between the two, and the impression about the quality-of-service influence emotions related to satisfaction which, in turn, affect future purchase behavior. Also, customer satisfaction is viewed as the overall assessment of the service provider (Anderson et al., 1997).

The literature related to service quality and satisfaction has emphasized that customers compare the performance of product and services on some standards (Spreng & Mackoy, 1996). Also, the quality of service as perceived by the customers is considered as an important factor that affects the level of satisfaction. Due to its relative importance in the service context, it became a wide debatable topic and focus of research for academics.

Literature revealed that the difference between perceived service quality and satisfaction is due to the use of different standards of comparison (Zeithaml et al., 1993; Parasuraman et al., 1988) Different authors stated that the standard of comparison to form satisfaction depends on customer's feelings regarding what will come out (predictive expectations) where perceived service quality defines what customers believe that a firm should deliver, also it is a result of comparing the performance (Spreng & Mackoy, 1996).

Service Delivery as a State Responsibility

Service can be defined as the performance of work or duty by an official or an act of helping others, or power to control or make use of resources, or an organization or system providing the public with something useful or necessary (The Universal 398 Dictionary 1961: 1394 – 1395). The act of delivery can be defined as producing or performing, handing over, taking goods to the intended recipient, or producing results as promised or expected (The Universal Dictionary 1961: 413). These definitions are adopted by Riekert (2001: 90), arriving at a combined definition which reads as follows: "Service delivery is concerned with the provision of a product or service, by a government or government body to a community that it was promised to, or which is expected by that community". Hanekom et al. (1987: 11) are of the opinion that the real core of public administration is the basic services performed for the public, such as policing and the protection of property. Cloete (1978: ii) adds that governmental institutions are continuously called upon to render with even greater intensity, a larger number of public services.

To execute their functions in order to realize their goals and objectives, governments are bound to supply and deliver public goods and services to their communities. Du Toit et al. (2002: 24) are of the opinion that services refer to the results emanating from the execution of a variety of functions or processes, while public services are considered to be some of the most tangible outputs of administrative agencies (Sharkansky, 1975: 334). Service delivery is defined in the Public Administration Dictionary as the provision of public activities, benefits or satisfactions (Fox & Meyer, 1995: 118). In the context of governance, consumers (or customers) are those who use the services and products delivered and provided by government institutions (Fox et al., 1991: 22). Customers as the users of services are as concerned about the nature of services as they are about what those services can help them achieve. Services should be a means to and end and that end is a better quality of life.

Thornhill and Hanekom (1995: 195) state that in the public sector the endeavour should always be for action which will lead to the improvement of the quality of service rendered by public institutions and Mitchell (1991: 72) supports this by adding that public institutions should constantly strive towards improving their service delivery. There is no such thing as 'arriving' when it comes to service delivery.

Gilbert (2004: 7) defines quality as the totality of features and characteristics of a product or service that bear on its ability to satisfy stated or implied needs. This definition can be summarized as consistent conformance to customers' expectations, as opposed to fitness for purpose. Deming (1986: 34) draws the same distinction by considering quality as "delighting the customer"; establishing a direct link to personal experience, as opposed to conformance to specification. Even though governments impose some services on people for the common good and ration others, the challenge of delighting the customer should lead to better treatment and possibly better outcomes than simply conforming to specification. If the users then are actively involved in developing specifications, the service is even more likely to at least meet expectations, if not actually to bring delight.

The primary objective of quality management is thus to create and maintain a system of practices and procedures that will assure that an institution's services satisfy its customers. Grenier (1988: 1) is of the opinion that customer satisfaction is achieved by economically delivering services that meet customer requirements and Ovretveit (1992:2) describes quality as fully meeting the needs of users of a service, at the lowest possible cost to the institution, within the directives set by authorities.

At this point it is important to establish clarity on the customers that are referred to. Riekert (2001: 88) states that all citizens making use of a particular service are in fact customers and that a customer can be defined as a person with whom you must deal, or a person or institution who buys goods and services. The term customer is used interchangeably with the term citizen throughout the White Paper on Transforming Public Service Delivery, or the Batho Pele White Paper of 1997 (Notice No. 1459 of 1997) (herein after referred to as the Batho Pele White Paper).

Quality Management for Improved Service Delivery

Based on the definition of quality established earlier, quality approaches with a customer focus are emphasized, rather than approaches like quality assurance, which can be defined as the prevention of quality problems through planned and systematic activities, emphasizing systems and procedures, rather than outputs or outcomes. In effect the quality assurance approach means that perfect systems can be developed – to produce goods or services that nobody wants or needs (Oakland, 1989: 10). Customer focused quality approaches involve programs and actions which emphasize the importance of the customer – users, citizens and communities as opposed to the service. Under these approaches programs range from conventional customer-care training to all services that are labeled as "customer first".

Total Quality Management (TQM) is one such philosophy that aims to inspire the behavior and interactions of people in work situations, through their attitudes, aspirations and motivations, to produce quality service (Pike & Barnes, 1996: 54). The main concern in TQM is self-improvement and group-improvement through team building and commitment to more efficient working practices and all three of the basic TQM models (process analysis, integrated and charismatic) focus on the customer in order to determine what actions the institution should take in order to improve itself. TQM aims to gradually change people's behavior towards the tasks they perform and their attitude towards other people. TQM can thus be summarized as a process of change with the following characteristics (Gilbert, 2004: 1): focus on customer expectations; prevention of problems; building workforce commitment to quality; and open decision making.

In order to grasp the link between quality management and improved service delivery, it is essential to refer to the philosophy underpinning quality management – continual improvement, and the cultural change which it can bring about, meaning that the desire is always to firstly perform better than the specification and secondly to always persist in improving on own past performance (Gaster & Squires, 2003: 321).

Quality Management as a Process of Continuous Improvement

A part from quality being essential to the survival and growth of any institution, the philosophy of continuous improvement can aid the public service in fulfilling its service delivery or welfare function in that it addresses the management challenge of increased outputs with limited means to meet the ever-increasing needs of society.

The methodology of continuous improvement involves analyzing the pattern of demand for a service, paying particular attention to understanding the causes of successes and failures. An improvement statement is then prepared using data such as public consultation results and complaints, as well as internal data and information. This identifies variations and indicates what is to be improved, such as reducing task time or error rate. Performance measures also need to be developed for these factors. The entire system or process is to be examined, that is, from the effects of inputs on the system to the results as outputs and the level and nature of satisfaction of customers as feedback. The system is to be flowcharted and redesigned on the basis of an analysis of which actions are essential and which could be changed or omitted. The effects are monitored using agreed performance measures. From then on the process is repeated so that improvement is indeed continuous.

In terms of feedback, the size of the gap between expectations (as input) and experience (with output) is what produces high, medium or low levels of satisfaction with service quality. When aiming to determine what influences customer satisfaction, research has shown that customers as service users judge the quality of services according to two criteria: firstly whether the services will help them achieve the outcomes they aspire to, and secondly whether services are delivered in ways that empower them (Evers et al., 1997: 78).

If the before mentioned definition of quality as consistent conformance to customers' expectations is considered, determining the quality of a service could be as simple as asking customers regularly how satisfied they are (Gilbert, 2004: 8). Thus, no public institution today should seek to assess the quality of services without drawing on the experience of those who use the services, as both government policy and good practice require those who use services to be consulted about and involved in their development and improvement. It is the experience of those who use the services that is the ultimate test of their quality and sustainability. Services, after all, exist for users – that is their prime purpose and function (Gaster & Squires, 2003: 176).

In addition, users of services supplied by public institutions in a democracy are often empowered to act as regulators or to elect or appoint regulators to act for them. As taxpayers and voters, customers are also suppliers of economic and political resources. For this reason, the preferences and views of citizens as consumers may have important consequences for the functioning of public institutions (Schwella et al., 1996: 22). Therefore, one of the most basic reasons for the public service undertaking consultation is that consensus building should be present in almost all public endeavors (Dodoo, 1997: 115); with consensus building referring to a condition in which the majority of participants can live with the end result of what society decides will define sustainability (Warner, 1997: 417).

However, when aiming to implement the continuous improvement process by seeking customer feedback, public institutions should keep in mind that citizen involvement is not an end in itself, but rather a means of effecting the required changes in the outcome of services.

A customer is satisfied when an offering performs better than expected and is dissatisfied when expectations exceed performance (Bolton, 1991) or when actual experience exceeded from expectations. Kotler et al. (2006) points out that whether the buyer is satisfied after purchase depends on the offer's performance in relation to the buyers' expectations. Similarly, customers have expectations with regard to the behavior of service employees, when these are exceeded, the level of customer satisfaction with the service provider is positively influenced (Thurau, 2004).

The most commonly used conceptualizations are based on two perspectives: cumulative and transaction. Several authors agree that there is need to adopt cumulative definition of satisfaction (Johnson, 2002) because cumulative satisfaction is a more fundamental indicator of the firm's past, current, and future performance and motivates firm's investment in customer satisfaction (Anderson, 1994) provide a reliable performance benchmark for making broad based comparisons (Johnson, 2002), whereas transaction specific satisfaction provide information about particular product or service encounter (Anderson, 1994). In consistent manner Hsu, 2008 posits that cumulative customer satisfaction is a fundamental indicator of firms past, current and future performance instead of specific transactional information about a product or service encounter. Cumulative satisfaction should be viewed as a theoretical or latent variable (similar to an attitude). As a latent variable, satisfaction can be empirically measured and meaningfully compared as a weighted-average or index of satisfaction indicators (Johnson, 2002). Homburg and Giering (2001) have taken broader perspective to explain customer satisfaction. Customer satisfaction can be defined ―as the result of a cognitive and affective evaluation, where some comparison standard is compared to the actually perceived performance. The satisfaction judgment is related to all the experiences made with a certain supplier concerning his products, the sales process, and the after-sale service.

Employee Prominent Role to Deliver Excellent Service

Much of the services marketing literature have focused on providing external customers with quality services (Gremler, 1995). Organizations depend on their employees to be in tune with the needs of their customers for purposes of designing and delivering services or products (Young, 2009). Rosenbluth and Peters, report that the needs of the customer are second to employee needs, because customer needs will be satisfactorily met only when employee needs are being satisfactorily met (as referred in Gremler, 1995).

Employees are important and inseparable part of the organization and have been received considerable attention by both academicians and practitioners. Employees in a service organization serve as representatives of both the organization and their products or services to the customer (Chigozirim, 2008) responsible for creating value for customers and delivering excellence in service quality (Judd, 2003; Hartline, 1996) also referred as first customers of the organization by many researchers (Chigozirim, 2008) and are recognized as the most crucial asset of today's organization (Eskildsen & Dahlgaard, 2000). According to Osman, 2004 delivering superior customer value and satisfaction are critical to a firm's competitive advantage. Dabholkar (2008) has reported that employees who are satisfied with their jobs will be more likely to purchase products from their employer than from a competitor. Similarly, employees of an organization can be considered as internal customers who, like external customers, are looking to get their needs satisfied (Gremler, 1995).

Valences of Rewards

Leaders should try to increase the expected value of rewards resulting from desired performance. Ways of doing this include: distribute rewards that employee's value, and individualize rewards. With a demographically diverse workforce, it is misleading to believe that all employees desire the same rewards. Some employees may value a promotion or a pay raise, whereas others may prefer additional vacation days, improved insurance benefits, day care, or elder-care facilities. Many companies have introduced cafeteria-style benefit plans—incentive systems that allow employees to select their fringe benefits from a menu of available alternatives. Another issue that may surface with expectancy theory is the need for leaders to minimize the presence of counter valent rewards—performance rewards that has negative valences. For example, group norms (see, e.g. the classic Hawthorne Studies, Mayo, 1933; Roethlisberger & Dickson, 1939) may cause some employees to perform their jobs at minimum levels even though formal rewards and the job itself would otherwise motivate them to perform at higher levels.

In general, these studies revealed that satisfaction to the delivery of services to clients or to the customers by the government agencies, institutions or any offices rely into its employee's response and how they handle it in a professional way that bring good image to satisfy the needs of the clients and that result for development.

Conclusion

During past few decades the interest of academics and researchers has been increased to measure the relationship between service quality and customer satisfaction. Both customer satisfaction and service quality are considered as extensive and vast subjects of research and many studies related to customer satisfaction are conducted in the area of service settings (Oliver & Swan, 1989; Cadotte, Woodruff & Jenkins, 1987; Swan & Trawick, 1980).

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