CUSTOMER'S PERCEPTION OF SERVICE QUALITY IN LIBRARIES

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Service quality assesses performance of products and services from customers' perspective. A library has both tangible products and intangible services. Assessing Service quality as management technique is of recent origin and new to Library and Information Science (LIS) professionals. Today, the library customers are open to multiple sources of information and expect quality material within shortest possible time irrespective of the format of information. The web technologies and commercial information service providers have impelled libraries to be customer focussed for their survival. Proper understanding of customers' perceptions along service quality dimensions is essential for LIS professionals to recognize the customer expectations. Aligning the products/services to meet customer expectations would result in reduced gaps in perceptions of service quality.

In this paper, the authors briefly explain the concept of service quality; trace its development and highlight some of the results of an empirical study on service quality in academic libraries is presented.

INTRODUCTION

Good service to customers is one of the primary goals of service organisations like libraries and is the ability of any service provider to provide promised products/services. Libraries are essentially learning organisations stimulating academic and research activities by providing access to world-class information resources. Traditionally, the success of any library is measured in terms of the size of its collection, staff, and budget. But in the present day competitive world, the libraries need to go beyond the traditional modes of assessments and apply marketing techniques for understanding customer requirements. Customer focus in services delivery is essential for satisfying the customers. The success depends on customers' perceptions or judgement on the quality of products/services provided by the service personnel in libraries. And service quality is the measure of how well the products/services delivered meet customer expectations.

CONCEPT AND DEVELOPMENT OF SERVICE QUALITY

Though quality is a much studied subject in manufacturing as well as service sectors, there is no universally accepted definition to define quality. The definition of quality is subjective, personal and changes from person-to-person, place-to-place, organization-to-organization, situation-to-situation and time-to-time. However, “Conformance to Standards” and “Fitness for Use” are the classic definitions of quality [1].

The quality as a subject of academic interest took momentum in 1950s as a result of the studies on the subject of quality by management gurus like Deming, Juran, Crosby, Taylor, Feigenbaum, and Peters [2]. However, the concepts of quality were mainly applied to products in the manufacturing sector.

Due awakening of consumerism in 1980s, the quality of service as a subject of academic interest caught the attention of marketing professionals and they attempted to define service quality from customers' perspective. Experts like Kotler, Levitt, Grönroos, Garvin, Cronin, Taylor, Teas, Rust, Parasuraman, Zeithaml, and Berry have contributed to the growth of the subject and many models were developed on its measurement. The team of Parasuraman, Zeithaml and Berry (hereafter PZB) had conducted several research studies to define service quality and identify the criteria that

1Customers refer to library users. The term customer, user or reader is used synonymously.
customers use while evaluating the service quality in service organisations. They define service quality as "the extent of discrepancy between customers' expectations or desires and their perception of what is delivered" [3]. In other words, it is the comparison of what customers expect before the use of product/service with their experience of what is delivered. This definition has been widely quoted and referred in service marketing literature.

While conducting the studies in many service industries PZB noticed that the unique characteristics of services such as intangibility, inseparability, perishability and heterogeneity, which differentiate them from the goods, often become problematic during assessment. Finally, they developed an instrument called "SERVQUAL" to measure service quality in organizations. They identified ten potentially overlapping dimensions or criteria that customers used to judge service quality. The original ten dimensions identified were tangibles, reliability, responsiveness, competence, courtesy, credibility, security, access, communication, and understanding of customer [4].

**SERVICE QUALITY DIMENSIONS AND SERVQUAL**

**Service Quality Dimensions**

The original ten dimensions identified by PZB were further consolidated into five broad dimensions of service quality namely **Tangibles, Reliability, Responsiveness, Assurance and Empathy** that customers consider for evaluating the quality of products/services. These dimensions are described as follows:

- **Tangibles**: "Appearance of physical facilities, equipment, personnel and communication materials". This includes organisation's physical facilities, their equipments, appearance of their personnel and appearance of communication materials used to promote their products/services.

- **Reliability**: "Ability of the organization to perform the promised service dependably and accurately". It means that the service organization performs the service right the first time and honours all its commitments.

- **Responsiveness**: "Willingness of organisation's staff to help customers and provide them with prompt service". This refers timeliness and promptness in providing the service.

- **Assurance**: "Knowledge, competence and courtesy of employees and their ability to convey trust and confidence in the customer towards the service firm". Competency refers to the possession of required skills and knowledge to perform the service. Courtesy involves politeness, respect, friendliness, honesty and trustworthiness of contact personnel.

- **Empathy**: "Caring, individualized attention the firm provided its customers". It includes the approachability, ease of contact of service providers and making of efforts to understand the customer needs.

The designers observed that these dimensions capture the key features of service quality and these dimensions are also known as SERVQUAL dimensions. These dimensions widely referred in service marketing and service quality literature.

SERVQUAL is essentially a questionnaire with a set of 22 statements spanning across five dimensions covering key issues of service quality. It has two sets of similar statements of which, the first set seeks customers' views in an ideal environment (E) and second set allows the customers to compare their expectations with service deliveries of specific organisation (P). For example, the sample statements are given below:

*Sample ExpectationStatement (E)*

The SERVQUAL instrument measures the service quality as difference between P and E (P minus E). The negative score of P-E indicates the shortfall or gap in service performance from customer perspectives and the organisations should take sincere interest to address those gaps. The model contains a separate section to rank the five dimensions on their relative importance to customers. The instrument was designed in 1985 and refined in 1991. After series of successful tests in hotel, telephone, automobile and banking services, they recommended that SERVQUAL is
Sample Expectation  
Statement (E)  
Sample Perception  
Statement (P)  

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Sample Expectation</th>
<th>Sample Perception</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>The staff in a good library will always be willing to help the users</td>
<td>The staff in my library is always willing to help me</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1, 2, 3, 4, 5 (1-least; 5-maximum)</td>
<td>1, 2, 3, 4, 5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The staff in a good library will give prompt service to users</td>
<td>The staff in my library gives me prompt service.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1, 2, 3, 4, 5</td>
<td>1, 2, 3, 4, 5</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

the reliable instrument, which could be applied to any service organizations by adopting suitable terminology.

SERVQUAL was not without any criticism. It was criticised for its method of P-E computation, as quality is subjective. Despite criticisms, the instrument emerged as a reliable tool to measure service quality and increasingly caught the attention of researchers and service organizations. In 1990s the SERVQUAL based research studies were traced in other service organisations including libraries.

APPLICATION OF SERVQUAL IN LIBRARIES

The concept of quality and customer service is not a new phenomenon for LIS professionals as it is rooted in library philosophy and principles. For example, Ranganathan's laws of library science particularly the fourth law "SAVE THE TIME OF THE READER" implicitly focus on quality of library products/services from customers' perspective [5]. This law views the quality through efficient catalogues, self-instructive signal guides, knowledgeable staff, proper shelving, error free records, good documentation service, and adequate finance. According to McNicol "Quality = Acquired Information Resources (right resources) made readily accessible in optimal time (right time) at least cost" [6]. Coogan also notes that "obtaining information quickly is the main concern of users who want their library to be state-of-the-art and responsive to their needs Knowledgeable staff provides seamless access to information regardless of format, whether the user in the library or at a remote location" [7]. The viewpoints expressed by Ranganathan, McNicol and Coogan emphasize on customer focus in library activities. Though the quality concept is rooted in library principles, the study of service quality as a management philosophy is of recent origin to LIS Professionals.

The applications of SERVQUAL have been traced in the LIS discipline from 1990s. The studies have varied from testing one service (Inter Library Loan) to testing the whole range of library services. The instrument has been used in academic, public and special libraries.

The empirical studies using SERVQUAL as principal survey instrument were found to be conducted by Hebert [8], White, Ables and Nitecki [9], Nitecki [10], Hernon [11], Tan and Foo [12], and Walters [13].

The SERVQUAL based user-surveys carried out by Cardiff University Libraries [14], Sterling Evans Library [15] and Virginia University Library [16] also reveal the validity of the instrument to measure service quality in library settings.

Pitt, Watson and Kavan [17, 18] used the instrument to measure service quality in information systems environment. Another significant development was the design of LIBQUAL+ by the Association Research Libraries (http://www.arl.org) which was adapted from SERVQUAL by making necessary modifications to suit libraries particularly for the ARL member libraries.

Most of the above-mentioned studies accept the validity of the SERVQUAL instrument and suggest that the instrument can be used in library environment with little caution and changes could be made in the instrument to suit local environment.

SERVICE QUALITY IN THE INDIAN CONTEXT

In Indian library scenario, the concept of assessing service quality from customers' perspective is still
in its infancy. Results of an empirical study conducted on service quality in academic libraries were revealing and a few of them are being discussed in following sections [19].

The study was conducted to investigate the quality of library and information services from customers’ perspective in eight academic libraries situated in Dakshina Kannada and Udupi districts of Karnataka State. The libraries in sampling frame were serving customers of postgraduate education in Medicine, Engineering, Science and Social Science disciplines. The sample population consisted of faculty members, research scholars and postgraduate students. The study used an adapted SERVQUAL as the principal instrument for data collection. The questionnaires were self-administered at respective institutes and mailed to those who were not available on campus. The study received 1252 responses, which constituted the primary data input for analysis and interpretation. Customer expectations and perceptions of service quality were measured as guided by SERVQUAL model. The research findings related to customers' ranking of relative importance of SERVQUAL dimensions and gaps in customers perceived service quality are discussed in following sections.

Relative Importance of SERVQUAL Dimensions

As mentioned earlier, PZB identified five dimensions namely, tangibles, reliability, responsiveness, assurance and empathy, which customers employ while evaluating service quality. They assessed the relative importance of five dimensions by asking respondents to allocate a total of 100 points across the five dimensions according to how important they perceive each dimension. Similarly, in this study also, based on pilot study, the respondents were asked to weigh each dimension by allocating a total of 10 points among five dimensions. Then the percentage of average score of each dimension was calculated. The ranking of relative importance of dimensions is presented in Figure 1.

This study observed that among the five dimensions, the reliability ranked as the most important dimension followed by responsiveness, tangibles, assurance and empathy in that order of importance. PZB the originators of SERVQUAL model express that: “...we are confident that the number one concern of the customers today regardless of type of service is reliability; and the facet that matters the least to current customers in assessing quality of service is tangibles” [20]. First part of the statement was sustained by this study also, but the second part (i.e. ranking of tangibles) did not match indicating the important role tangibles play in developing countries like India.

ANOVA and T-tests were carried out to determine the significance of differences in ranking pattern among customer disciplines (engineering, medicine, science, social science) and categories (faculty, researchers and students). The results revealed that the differences in customer rankings between and within the groups were statistically not very significant indicating the homogeneity in preferences among the academic community irrespective of type of education pursued.

Comparison with Other Studies

The results of this study relating to relative importance of dimensions were further compared with those of previous studies conducted by LIS professionals in library setting along with the original study conducted by PZB. The comparative figures are presented graphically in Figure 2.

Figure 2 reveals that the highest ranking pattern for reliability was consistent across all the studies. But the results related to tangibles were varying between the studies. While tangibles ranked as the least important dimension in the previous studies, it was not ranked as least in this study.

The results presented through above two figures disclose that the reliability was consistently ranked...
as the most important criterion from customers perspectives while evaluating service quality. This study's results were congruent with that of previous studies including the original study conducted by PZB. This implies that in service organizations, customers attach top priority to reliability of the service and any short fall might result in frustration and strained relationship with the service provider. Berry and Parasuraman also express that interacting with frustrated customer can demoralize staff and might decrease their enthusiasm to serve customers [21].

Regarding tangibles, unlike previous studies, it was ranked third most important criteria in this study indicating the crucial role they play in developing countries like India. This dimension might have been taken for granted in developed countries.

**Customers' Perceived Service Quality (P-E)**

The SERVQUAL measures of service quality are measured in terms of difference between customers' perceptions (P) and expectations (E). The magnitude of difference between them measures how well the facilities and services provided in the library match the customer expectations. The negative score of ‘P minus E’ (P- E) indicates the shortfall in perception of service quality. PZB noted, “More negative the SERVQUAL score, more the service quality shortfall in the eyes of customers”. The P - E score also termed as “gap”. The gap scores computed in this study are shown in Table 1.

Table 1 indicates that reliability- the most important dimension from customers’ eye received the most negative score (mean -0.63). Responsiveness, the second most important dimension had the second most negative score (-0.55). Empathy (-0.53) and tangibles (-0.43) too had significant negative scores. Assurance had the least negative score (-0.26).

**Weighted Gap**

The relative importance scores for SERVQUAL dimensions were obtained from respondents first, to identify the relative rating of each dimension and second, to compute weighted average SERVQUAL score. The weighted score for each dimension was computed as guided by originators of the instrument. The overall unweighted mean P - E scores resulted in a negative disconfirmation score of -0.48. This score was further widened to -0.52.
Manjunatha K and Shivalingaiah D

Table 1
Gaps in Perceptions of Service Quality along SERVQUAL Dimensions (n=1252)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Sl.No</th>
<th>Dimensions</th>
<th>Expectation Mean - E</th>
<th>Perception Mean - P</th>
<th>Difference P - E</th>
<th>Std.Dev.</th>
<th>Percent %</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>Reliability</td>
<td>4.16</td>
<td>3.53</td>
<td>-0.63</td>
<td>0.78</td>
<td>26</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>Responsiveness</td>
<td>4.10</td>
<td>3.54</td>
<td>-0.55</td>
<td>0.82</td>
<td>23</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>Empathy</td>
<td>3.93</td>
<td>3.39</td>
<td>-0.54</td>
<td>0.82</td>
<td>22</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>Tangibles</td>
<td>4.07</td>
<td>3.64</td>
<td>-0.43</td>
<td>0.82</td>
<td>18</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>Assurance</td>
<td>3.87</td>
<td>3.61</td>
<td>-0.26</td>
<td>0.87</td>
<td>11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Overall</td>
<td>4.02</td>
<td>3.54</td>
<td>-0.48</td>
<td>0.65</td>
<td>100</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note: the mean score is on Five-point scale.

Table 2 — Mean Gap Scores (weighted & Unweighted) along SERVQUAL Dimensions (P-E)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th></th>
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<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>Reliability</td>
<td>0.29</td>
<td>4.16</td>
<td>1.24</td>
<td>3.53</td>
<td>1.05</td>
<td>-0.63</td>
<td>0.19</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>Responsiveness</td>
<td>0.21</td>
<td>4.10</td>
<td>0.87</td>
<td>3.54</td>
<td>0.75</td>
<td>-0.55</td>
<td>0.12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>Tangibles</td>
<td>0.20</td>
<td>4.07</td>
<td>0.81</td>
<td>3.64</td>
<td>0.71</td>
<td>-0.43</td>
<td>0.10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>Assurance</td>
<td>0.17</td>
<td>3.87</td>
<td>0.65</td>
<td>3.61</td>
<td>0.61</td>
<td>-0.26</td>
<td>0.04</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>Empathy</td>
<td>0.13</td>
<td>3.93</td>
<td>0.51</td>
<td>3.39</td>
<td>0.44</td>
<td>-0.53</td>
<td>0.07</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Overall</td>
<td>1.00</td>
<td>4.02</td>
<td>4.07</td>
<td>3.54</td>
<td>3.55</td>
<td>-0.48</td>
<td>0.52</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note: 1. Un.Wt: Unweighted mean score, Weight: Weighted mean score; WGap%: percentage in overall weighted gap score

The five SERVQUAL dimensions, overall customer satisfaction level, and word-of-mouth recommendations have direct impact on customers' perceptions of library service quality. The correlation between them is positive and highly significant.

The experience with specific elements of tangibles such as nature of library holdings, type of facilities, building space and ease of access might moderate customer perception of quality in libraries.

The customers' demographic characteristics, such as customers' age, status, past experience; frequency of visits to the library and time spent in a visit to the library could directly influence the perceived quality.

CONCLUSION

The customer satisfaction and perceptions of quality depends on the extent to which customer expectations are matched by products/services
delivered by the library. Customers attach top priority to reliability of the service and responsiveness from service personnel. They also expect that the library should be equipped with good resources and consistent services. Understanding customers’ preferences along service quality dimensions reveal their priorities and addressing the same would reduce the gaps in service quality. Good words of appreciation from satisfied customers will bring more loyal users to the library. This warrants service providers’ sincerity, self-interest and commitment to serve the customers. The periodic customer surveys will give insights into the areas that require more attention.

Managing service quality is not a fad but a commitment from top management for continuous improvement. We need to possess leadership qualities to motivate our library staff to provide prompt services to customers and should take full advantage of technology to provide promised services on time and should not raise customer expectations with false or unrealistic promises.

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18. PITT [Leyland F]; WATSON [R T] and KAVAN [C B]. Measuring Information Systems Service Quality: Concerns for a Complete Canvas. MIS Quarterly. 21, 2; 1997; 209-221.