

***A POSSIBLE MODEL FOR MEASURING THE SERVICES QUALITY IN
HOSPITALITY BRANCH***

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Abstract: Based on a better forecasting and response to customers' needs, the companies compete with each in order to provide superior value. Recognizing customers as seekers for solutions for their problems and for values that result from the use of what they buy, it is fundamental for the long-term business viability. The way in which a company defines its business, and the way in which it desires to build its market image, depends on the understanding of this issue.

This article explores new directions regarding service quality and also the determining dimensions of quality as expected by the consumers. Furthermore, in the present paper, the authors emphasize the differences existent between the degrees of importance that various dimensions have in defining service quality. The objective of this paper is to evaluate in a critical manner the different models used for measuring service quality and, based on the traditional models; the authors will elaborate a new conceptual model for measuring service quality in the hospitality industry.

Keywords : value, customer satisfaction, model of measurement, service quality, hospitality industry.

Introduction

In the last decades, the service industry has become the dominant sector of the economy, and relevant studies show that the "service quality" variable is an essential condition to the success and survival of the firms in today's competitive environment. Therefore, the interest in service quality has increased in a visible manner (Ghobadian et al, 1994 cited in Akbaba, A, 2005). According to relevant literature, service quality leads to loyalty, attracting new customers, positive word-of-mouth, employees' satisfaction and implicitly their commitment, improved corporate image, cost reduction and increase in business performance. (Berry et al., 1989). And while the service industry and the quality variable as a competitive advantage are considered to become more important than ever, the service quality concept has yet to be fully developed, even though Ghobadian et al. first underlined this fact in 1994.

The process of evaluating service quality is far more complex than that of evaluating product quality. This is the result of the service inner nature, its heterogeneity, the fact that its production cannot be separated by its consumption, as well as its perishability and intangibility (Frochot and Hughes, 2000). In the hotel industry, other attributes, which make difficult evaluating service quality, have been identified, such as imprecise standards, short distribution channels, reliability and coherence, interactions and information exchanges with

customers, and fluctuating demand. All these complicate even more the task of defining how service quality should be delivered and measured in the hospitality industry. Furthermore, the demand for hotel services is generally grouped around peak periods of the day, week or year, which further increases the difficulty of delivering services of higher quality (Barrington and Olsen, 1987; Mei et al., 1999).

As our endeavor is to create a better model for measuring service quality, we have undertaken a vast literature review, by analyzing some of the existing models in relevant literature. Based on our finds, we will try to elaborate a model for measuring service quality adapted to the hospitality hotel industry.

1. Literature review

Since 1980, the concept of service quality has been a much discussed and controversial subject, which has yet to receive an universally accepted definition. Authors, such as Christian Grönroos, Leonard L. Berry, A. Parasuraman and Valarie A. Zeithaml, have had a significant contribution to literature. With the idea that services are different from products as a starting point, these authors have underlined the need for a better understanding of the concept of service quality. The most relevant articles are from the period between 1985 and 1988, which have greatly increased the theoretical and practical knowledge in the field of service quality.

Parasuraman, Zeithaml and Berry (1985, p. 41) highlight the difficulty of defining the concept of service quality since they consider it to be an evasive and unclear term, based on service characteristics of intangibility, heterogeneity and inseparability. Because of service intangibility, it is more difficult for companies to understand how customers perceive and evaluate service quality. In the case when a service is bought, there is less physical evidence than when a product is bought.

Because of the lack of concrete evidence, customers need to use other types of clues when deciding if a service offer is superior to another one. Secondly, services are heterogeneous. This means that the notion of service quality varies depending on the performance of the front-line personnel, the time when it was delivered and the type of client who received it. Taking these characteristics into account, it becomes a difficult task for companies to ensure a high consistency between the service which was offered and the service which was finally delivered. This, in turn, makes troublesome for companies to determine on an objective level the given service quality at a certain point in time. Thirdly, because of the inseparability between production and consumption, service quality is mainly limited to the quality of the interactions between the service supplier and customer. As it follows, the two partners (front-line personnel and customers) can positively or negatively influence the perceived level of service quality. This limits the company in what it can do to control the quality of the services they provide.

Eventually Parasuraman et al. (1985), cited in Grönroos (1990), highlights the necessity for companies to identify the basic elements which customers use in evaluating service quality. The same idea is presented by the representative of the Nordic School (Grönroos, 1991, pp. 36-37) when they state: „when a service supplier knows the way customers evaluate service quality, it can influence that evaluation in the direction it desires...”

In Lewis' vision (1989), service quality is a critical dimension of competitiveness. Berry and Parasuraman (1992) state that „, a service supplier company is defined by the quality of their services. In the case when services are mediocre, then the company is mediocre" (p. 5). Therefore, high service quality is the answer to many problems a company faces at a certain point in time. This vision has been largely accepted by theoreticians and practitioners, but it is not without its controversy. The models proposed are based on the expectancy disconfirmation paradigm. The North American School of Thought suggests determining perceived service quality as the difference between perceptions and expectations since the results of focus groups have confirmed that both the dimensions are related to the results, and those implicated in the process influence the quality assessments made by the clients (Zeithaml and Parasuraman, 2004, cited in Radomir, L., 2013).

In the traditional approach, service quality results from the comparison between customer expectations and perceived performance of the service (Parasuraman, Zeithaml, Berry, 1985). The most common definition for service quality is that quality is the customer's perception of service excellency, which has been defined by the customer's impression of the delivered service (Berry, Zeithaml, Parasuraman, 1985). Even so, the more quality is being analysed as a concept, the more difficult it is to give it a meaning (Grasing and Hessick 1988, cited in Radomir et al., 2012). On the other hand, delivering high-quality services and satisfying customer expectations remain the most important elements in the service industry (Hung et al., 2003).

2. Dimensions and measuring models for service quality

In relevant literature, service quality is based on many dimensions (Grönroos, 1982, 1990; Parasuraman et al., 1985). Literature review regarding service quality explicitly shows that European researchers had a great influence on the study of the service quality dimensions. Lehtinen J. and Lehtinen U. (1982, cited in Kang and Jeffrey, 2004), define service quality in terms related to physical quality, interactive quality and corporate image. Physical quality refers to the tangible aspects of the service, while interactive quality implies the interaction that occurs between the customer and the service supplier, or its representative. Corporate image quality refers to the image the supplier has in the mind of its current and potential clients, and all the other types of public. Comparing it with the other two dimensions of service quality, corporate quality has the tendency of being much more stable over time.

Service quality has been the focus of numerous models, being analyzed in relation to service, customer expectations and perceptions. Seth, Deshmukh and Vrat (2005), have analyzed nineteen models of measuring service quality, highlighting the advantages and disadvantages of each, yet they didn't go through all the models available in

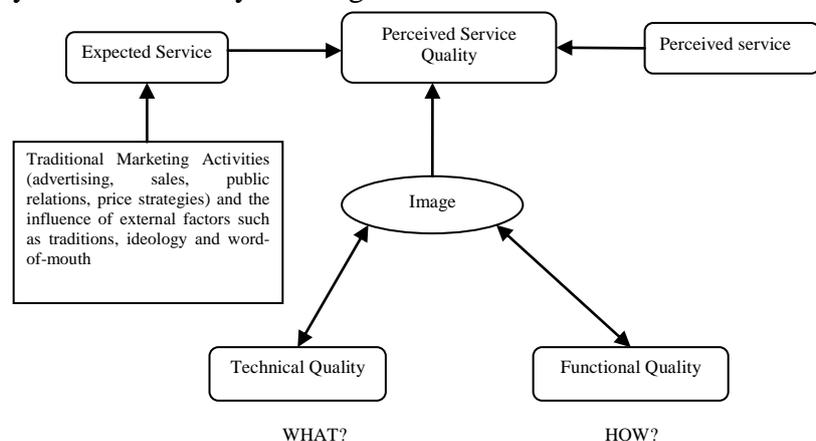


Figure 1: Service quality model (source: Grönroos, 1984, p. 40)

literature. One result of the analysis was the conclusion that improving service quality leads to increase in customer satisfaction and loyalty.

2.1 Service quality model by Grönroos (1984)

Grönroos (1984) suggested that the model of perceived service quality should take into consideration those quality dimensions which can replace the physical characteristics of products. Therefore, he has identified technical quality (“what” service is being delivered) and the functional quality (“how” is the service delivered?).

Several years later, Grönroos (1991, p. 48) details the model by subdividing *technical quality* into: knowledge, technical solutions, machines, computerized systems, employees’ technical skills; and the *functional quality* dimension into accessibility, consumer contacts, attitudes, internal relations, behavior, service mindedness and appearance. Therefore, “perceived service quality is the result of an evaluation process in which the customer compares their expectations with what they perceived is actually being delivered” (Grönroos, 1991, p.38). The author considers that the solution for satisfying customers is eliminating the gap between the expected and perceived service, and when that is impossible, reducing the difference as much as possible.

Service quality can be determined through several criteria. Therefore, the perceived service is of high quality only if these criteria are met. Because of this, the representatives of the Swedish School of Service Marketing (Grönroos and Gummesson, 1988 cited in Brogowicz, Delene, Lyth, 1990) propose six criteria for determining service quality:

- Professionalism and skills;
- Behavior and attitudes, interest in giving a solution to customer’s problems;
- Accessibility and flexibility;
- Reliability and trustworthiness;
- Recovery or the organization’s capacity of taking corrective actions when something goes wrong;
- Reputation and credibility.

Although usually referenced in literature, the model proposed by Christian Grönroos is not without its limits, something underlined by several authors including the researcher himself. From his perspective “The service quality model wasn’t supposed to be an operational model for service quality” (Grönroos, 1998, p.329). The model’s objective was to offer a support to researchers and practitioners in finding solutions to customers’ problems when the products are intangible (Grönroos, 2001). The authors Ennew and Waite (2007) appreciated the total quality model, respectively its approach, as being a qualitative one. Likewise Loonam and O’Loughlin, (2008), as cited in Radomir (2013, p.25) suggest that the Nordic School representative does not offer enough details regarding the proposed quality dimensions.

The American researchers (Berry, Parasuraman, 1991, p.16, cited in Pentescu, 2014) propose five elements for determining service quality: *reliability*, *assurance*, *responsiveness*, *tangibles* and *empathy*. Among these, the most important one is reliability, customers losing their trust in the organization which makes mistakes when delivering the service or when it doesn’t keep its promises. The other dimensions (responsiveness, assurance, tangibles and empathy) are evaluated during service delivery, their importance being in exceeding

customers' expectations. Therefore, successful organizations exceed their customers' expectations by creating emotional bonds with them. According to I. Cetină (2009, p.40), the main mistakes a service supplier must avoid are: the lack of, or wrong identification of customer needs, errors in creating quality standards, errors in designing the service and inadequate business administration models.

2.2 - SERVQUAL- The Gap Model

Parasuraman, Zeithaml and Berry((1985) have developed a service quality measuring model by comparing the expected quality with the perceived one. This model has been known as the GAP Model (Seth, 2005). The authors, (PZB) have made the model by analyzing five different types of gaps that may happen during service delivery: Gap 1 – the difference between customer expectations and the managerial perception of them; Gap 2 – the difference between customer's expectations as seen by the management and service quality standards; Gap 3 – the difference between quality standards and actual service delivery; Gap 4 – the difference between service delivery and external communications; and Gap 5 – the difference between the expected service and the experienced one, this last difference being the sum of all four previous gaps. According to this model, quality can be determined as: $SQ = \sum_{j=1}^k (P_{ij} - E_{ij})$, where: SQ= service quality; k= number of attributes or service dimensions; P_{ij} = perception of individual „i” regarding the performance of attribute „j”; E_{ij} = expectations of individual „i” regarding the qualities of attribute „j”.

The model is an analytical instrument which allows managers to identify differences between expectations and perceptions of service quality by analyzing various elements pertaining to the service offer. The model is focused externally giving managers the opportunity to identify relevant quality factors from the point of view of the customer. Its limits are the fact that it is an exploratory study and there are no procedures for measuring the different gaps that may occur.

This exploratory research has been improved by introducing the SERVQUAL scale, which can measure customer's perceptions on service quality. (Berry, Parasuraman and Zeithaml, 1988). The SERVQUAL model is based on the expectancy disconfirmation paradigm, and it was developed with ten quality dimensions as starting points, which were selected from 97 elements previously identified by PZB in 1985. However, through two quantitative studies, Zeithaml, Parasuraman and Berry, manage to reduce the research instrument to 22 items which they further grouped into five quality dimensions: tangibles (4 items), reliability (5 items), responsiveness (4 items), assurance, (4 items), empathy (5 items). This is one of the best-known and utilized instruments for measuring service quality, as it is perceived by the customers (Bloemer et al., 1999; Kang and James, 2004). By analyzing these five dimensions, we can tell that at their core, they refer to the human component of service delivery; reliability, empathy and responsiveness showing a direct link to the performance of the personnel.

Applied to many activity sectors (Parasuraman et al., 1991a), the SERVQUAL model has been utilized by both researchers and managers. Nonetheless, there are practical studies which show that the service quality dimensions may be more than five. According to Carman (1990, cited in Souca, 2013, p.93) analyzing medical services shows the existence of nine

service quality dimensions, while Saleh and Ryan (1991) have found other five dimensions for the hotel industry than the ones previously identified by PZB: conviviality, tangibles, reassurance, avoidance of sarcasm and empathy. Tsang and Qu (2000), in order to identify the gaps between customers and managers' perceptions used 35 attributes, in a study adapted after Parasuraman et al. (1985). According to their results, the general quality of hotel services in China has fallen quite below tourists' expectations, the biggest difference between perceived performance and expectations being about physical premises, professionalism and skills and price value. Furthermore, according to Petrick (2002, cited in Morar, 2013) the benefits customers receive after buying services are quality, emotional response, reputation and monetary price. The scale developed by Petrick was called PERVAL SERV.

Still in the hotel industry, Nadiri and Hussain (2005) have discovered only two dimensions of service quality: tangibles and intangibles. Therefore, it can be said that the number of dimensions is dependent on the type of service, which has been analyzed. Some authors (Sánchez et al., 2006, cited in Morar, 2013), have developed a measuring scale for post-purchase value in the tourism sector, which they have named GLOVAL. This scale has six dimensions for perceived value, four of them being under functional value: stability value, functional value of contact personnel, functional value of service quality and price as a functional value. The other two dimensions cover the affective aspect of perceived value: emotional value and social value.

2.3 The Model proposed by Sweeney et al. 1997

According to Zeithaml's definition (1988, cited in Morar, 2013) perceived value results from comparing personal benefits with sacrifices. The perception is about benefits and sacrifices as seen by the customers. The concept of *value* used in the model proposed by Sweeney et al. (1997), cited in Seth et al. (2005, p. 927), represents "value for money". The model underlines that, next to functional and technical service quality, perceptions over price and overall service quality have a direct influence on perceived value.

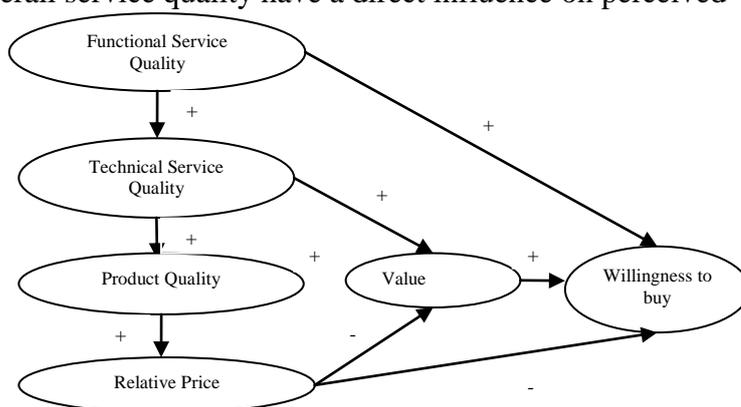


Figure 2: Model proposed by Sweeney et al. (1997) (source: Seth, Deshmukh and Prem (2005, p. 928))

The perceived technical quality of retail services is an important determinant in perceived product quality and intentions to repurchase. The perceived functional service quality, on the other hand, is an indirect influence on repurchase desire by coloring the customers' perception of product quality and their value. This will eventually lead to the

desire to repurchase them, independently of the product's value. When it comes to its limits, the perceived value model is one-dimensional since it analyzes only the "value for money" aspect of products. Furthermore, the study has very few items taken into consideration (Seth et al., 2005, Helkhula et al., 2010).

2.4 Service quality, value and customer satisfaction model

The model proposed by Oh in 1999 (cited in Seth, Deshmukh and Vrat, 2005), represents an integrative model for service quality, with variables such as: perception, perceived service quality, customer satisfaction, perceived customer value and intentions to repurchase. The arrows in it indicate causality, the model emphasizing the fact that perceived customer value has a significant role in the post-purchase decision-making process, representing a predecessor to customer satisfaction and intentions to repurchase. Furthermore, the model created by Oh indicates that the perceived price has a negative influence on perceived value.

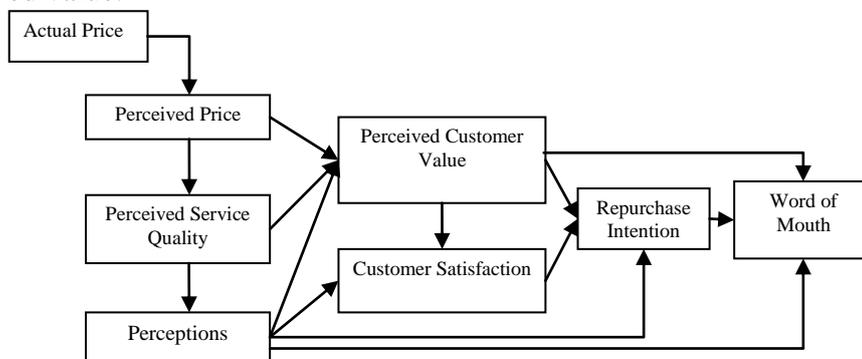


Figure 3: Service quality, value and customer satisfaction model (source: Seth, Deshmukh and Vrat (2005, p.928))

The model can be used for understanding the customer's decision-making process and to evaluate company's performance on certain target markets. The main limit of the model is that it hasn't been generalized for more types of services, and the variables are measured through a small number of items (Seth et al., 2005, Helkhula et al., 2010, cited in Micu, 2013).

2.5 A "possible" model for evaluating service quality in the hospitality industry

According to Johns and Howard (1998), measuring service quality has operational value only in the case when it can indicate if the service has been satisfying or not for the customers. From the analyzed models, the starting point for our proposed model is the one created by Oh (1999) since it contains a finality, a consequence of delivering value to the customers by evaluating even their intentions to repurchase and their willingness to engage in positive word-of-mouth. However, the model can be improved by eliminating some of the factors Oh thought would lead to satisfaction and by introducing new ones.

Concretely, we will eliminate the perception dimension, since what is being perceived by customers is already measured by perceived service quality. In addition, we eliminated the perceived price indicator and decided to keep only actual price. Price value is an important indicator for customer satisfaction (Getty and Thompson, 1994), and because of this, we have included it as a measurement indicator. According to Hallowell (1996, p.29), customer satisfaction is the result of perception over received value, which consists of the comparison between perceived service value and actual service price. Therefore, an essential determinant

of overall customer satisfaction is the perceived quality of the service which has been delivered and its perceived value (Fornell et al., 1996, cited in Pentescu, 2014).

Furthermore, price is a subjective construct which has a moderating role between service quality and customer satisfaction (Caruana et al., 2000).

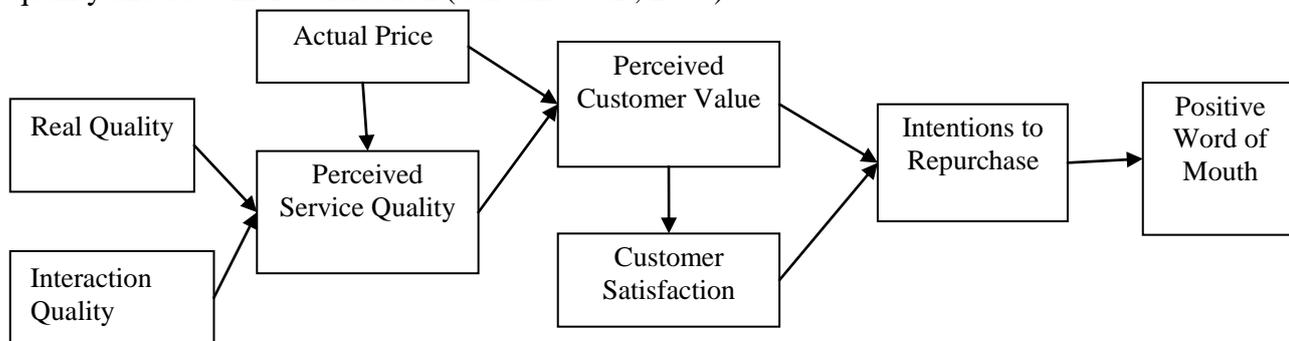


Figure 4: Model for measuring service quality in the hospitality industry (source: the authors of the article)

Perceived service quality in our model is the result of real service quality and the quality of the interactions between those involved in delivering the service. Real service quality, in the authors' opinion is given by *service tangibles* (PBZ, 1985), *personnel knowledge* (Cadotte and Turgeon, 1988; Caro and García, 2008, cited in Michael et al., 2010), *service performance* (Chelladurai and Chang, 2000; Kim and Cha, 2002 cited in Michael et al., 2010), *service accuracy* (Akan, 1995) and *organization reputation*. According to Zeithaml and Bitner, 1996, cited in Kandampully (2000), a company's reputation or image has the ability to influence customer perceptions of the company's products and services.

Several researchers have indicated the importance of the "personnel" component, which has a fundamental impact in the process of delivering a service and how the service quality is being perceived (Bigné, Martínez, Miquel, and Belloch, 1996; LeBlanc, 1992, cited in Michael et al., 2010). The interaction quality is comprised of the *personnel relationship skills* (Brady and Cronin, 2001, cited in Michael et al., 2010), *personnel willingness* (Choi and Chu, 2001; Czepiel et al., 1985, cited in Michael et al., 2010); and *employee's competence* (Knutson, 1988, cited in Michael et al., 2010). Personnel relationship skills are given by the personnel credibility, responsiveness, and empathy; dimensions which have already been proposed and verified by American researchers (Berry, Parasuraman, 1991, cited in Pentescu, 2014). In the author's opinion, they are overlapping the service functional quality dimension.

Conclusions, limits and future research

Quality is an important concept which has been used in most fields, covering a large number of concepts and meanings. In the service industry, quality is the most important element, as it is essential for having loyal and satisfied clients who are willing to promote the service. When it comes to the hospitality industry, it is very important that the hotels offered high-quality services and experiences (Gundersen, Heide and Olsson, 1996). Because of this, the authors consider that it is essential to determine how service customers perceive quality and, which are the determining factors in evaluating it. Furthermore, expectations and perceptions of service quality should always be the main focus for those operating in the hospitality industry.

After reading the relevant literature we consider that, regardless of the nature of the services, a model for measuring service quality must be created, which would take into account both the market and the type of services for which it has been applied. Of the same opinion, there are also Karatepe et al., (2005), who consider that, although there are many other models for measuring service quality, they have to be adapted to the country where the study takes place, because the definition of quality depends on the cultural background of the respondents. Hayes (2008, cited in Radomir, 2013), considers as well that some standard dimensions can be generalized for more than one service category, yet others are specific to only certain types of services.

The limits of this study are, among others, the lack of empirical validation for the proposed model, which could offer the evidence of the model's validity and reliability for use in future research. Furthermore, the large number of papers dedicated to the study of quality, service quality, and measurement models, makes it improbable to study them all in detail, in order to use them as theoretical support for the model which we proposed in the current article.

Future research should consider the field testing of the proposed model for measuring service quality as perceived by tourists and hotel services customers, and then to analyze the data and present them in forthcoming article.

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