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CUSTOMER PERCEPTION OF SERVICE QUALITY IN SPORT

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SUMMARY

This article is a review of literature related to the study of service quality in sport. It is aimed mainly at services that are provided by recreational sport institutions, such as fitness and wellness centres. This work gives current theoretical findings about service quality perception within the recreational sport industry. It introduces models and methods most frequently used in professional literature for a better understanding of sport services constructs and better evaluation of their quality. These models are based on current service quality perception, although service quality is a multidimensional and hierarchical construct. The study considers conceptual differences in research concerning the area of service quality. It gives a complete conceptual framework for other researchers in the area of sport management, as well as specialists.

Key words: review, sport, fitness, service, quality, customer

INTRODUCTION

During the last two decades the request for service quality has rapidly grown. As society develops economically, it also matures culturally. Basic knowledge is increased as well as social demands on service quality. Nowadays, service quality is acknowledged as one of the most important topics in the area of service control. Marketing and the word “quality” have become a part of everyday lexicon in this area.

The increased request for service quality motivates many researchers to do research in this field of interest. The results can be summarized in this statement: providing services of high quality is not only one of the most important factors for customer satisfaction (Anderson, Fornell & Lehmann, 1994; Gronroos, 1990; Patterson & Spreng, 1998), but also one of the main criteria measuring competitiveness of services. (Douglas & Connor, 2003; Rosen, Karban & Scribner, 2003).

To evaluate how provided services meet the requirements of their customers, managers use various measures of service quality and customer satisfaction. Practical management

and a range of academic staff pay attention to this field. (Tailor & Baker 1994; Spreng & MacKoy, 1996; Zeithaml, Berry & Parasuraman 1996 et al.).

Many services, including sport services, help create a demanding customer. High customer expectations of sport institutions lead managers to increase the range of their services even more. However, many sport institutions are unable to do this. Still, they can target the specific demands of their customers and provide them with complete satisfaction with their services (Guest & Taylor, 1999; Robinson, 1995, 1999). Fulfilling customer expectations in service basics should lead to satisfied customers, and they, in return, remain loyal to the service and recommend it to other customers.

Sport managers should be interested in their service, understand what their service is about, and understand how it particularly influences the customer's behaviour. They should know which specific aspects of their services influence customers' satisfaction and understanding of service quality, which results in loyal behaviour.

PURPOSE

This work serves as a review of professional literature engaged in service quality in sport. The work gives current theoretical findings about service quality perception, mainly in the recreational sport industry. It also represents the latest concepts of service quality approaches and specific methods used by specialists in the evaluation of service quality in sport.

RESULTS

Definitions of the term "service quality" change with different conceptual frameworks. Bitner and Hubbert (1994) define service quality as "the consumer's overall impression of the relative inferiority/superiority of the organization and its services" (p. 77). On the other hand, a traditional definition of service quality is "comparing consumers' expectations with real service performance" (Gronroos, 1984; Parasuraman, Zeithaml & Berry, 1985). Zeithaml et al. (1996) define service quality as "the extent of discrepancy between customers' expectations or desire and their perceptions" (p. 19).

The above definitions of service quality indicate that quality itself has many meanings. It can be an attribute of a product, service, process, or system in the work surroundings (Spencer, 1994), or the performance itself (Deighton, 1992). Furthermore, criteria and norms determining quality level are changing: (a) quality as perfection, (b) quality as value, (c) quality as concord with specifications, and (d) quality as balancing or overstepping customers' expectations (Chelladurai & Chang, 2000; Reeves & Bednar, 1994). Eventually, the meaning of quality can differ in relation with the entity judging it (Chelladurai & Chang, 2000). Overall, the meaning of the word "quality" is relative and can differ due to various circumstances (Reeves & Bednar, 1994; Spencer, 1994). For this reason, it is necessary to analyse the sense of service quality in relation with the recreational sport industry.

Kotler (2001) defines service as "activity which one part can offer to the other, it is completely intangible and does not create any acquired possession. Its realization can, but

does not have to be, linked with a physical product” (Kotler, 2001, s. 490). Many authors count it among sport products. Shank currently defines sport products as “goods, services or whatever combination of these two which is meant to bring benefit to sport participants” (Shank, 2008, s. 147). According to Čáslavová (2000), a sport product can be “all tangible and intangible properties offered in order to satisfy desires and needs of customers associated with the area of physical education and sport” (Čáslavová 2000, s. 81). Sport services are reckoned as basic products of physical education and sport.

Services provided within the recreational sport sector could be described by the following: Customers not only participate but are actively involved in production and consumption. Besides, sport services in recreational sport usually require a close relationship and high level of involvement between the service provider and customers (Chelladurai, 1998; Milne & McDonald, 1999).

According to Grönroos (1984), two basic components of quality can be distinguished: technical and functional. The technical component is related to measurable service elements that the customer gets during their interaction with the service provider. The issue is the result of the service provided. Evaluation of the service technical quality seems to be easier, but it can often be objectively judged by specialists only or after a certain time elapses.

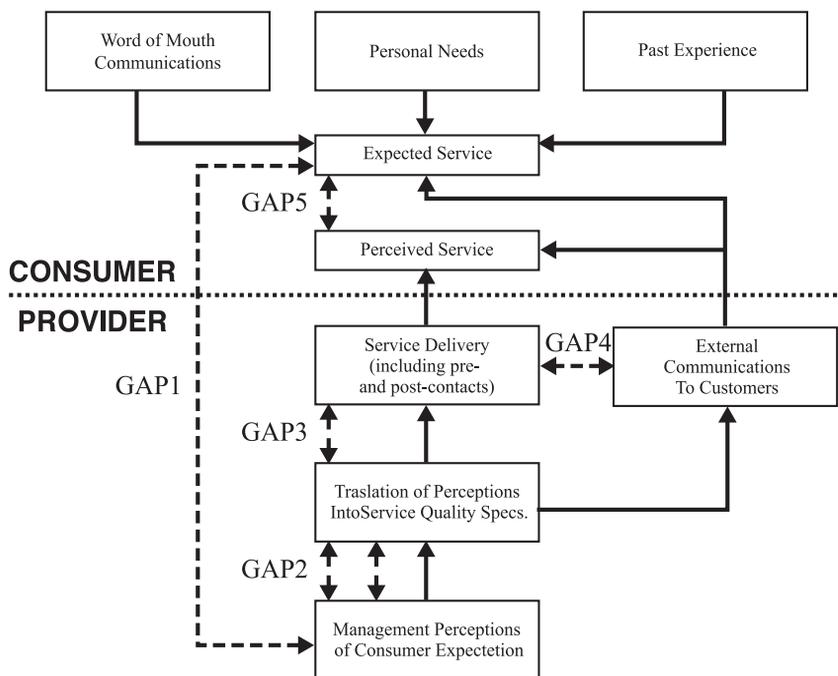
However, customers are also interested in the way a service is provided, i.e. in the so-called functional service quality. Perception of functional quality is more subjective. It can be influenced by the environment in which the service is provided, by the organization employees’ behaviour, and length of waiting period, etc.

Technical and functional qualities contribute to the organization’s image, which retrospectively influences expectations a customer associates with a service. If we evaluate a service quality in relation to customers’ expectations, it is essential to find out what kind of expectation is there. This can be done only through questioning. Furthermore, these imaginations are highly subjective. Quality evaluation can then differ according to whether much higher or lower quality is connected with the expectation.

Complex investigation into organisation service quality should include inquiries about attitudes of both parties involved: the customer and the organization. The customer’s attitude is connected with the way they perceive the functional service quality and the technical service quality.

A range of methods are used in research to evaluate the quality of sport service areas. One of the most frequently used methods is the SERVQUAL method (Parasuraman, Zeithaml & Berry, 1988). This method serves to evaluate service quality on the basis of determining customer satisfaction with the service provided. Its current form is based on the 5 GAP model. Gap 1 implies the difference between customers’ expectations and what the company leadership thinks customers expect. To lessen this gap, it is essential to do research of customers’ opinions and write down important data, listen to the personnel who are in touch with clients, and flatten the hierarchical company structure. Gap 2 occurs when service characteristics, created by the company, do not meet the customers’ expectations in the way they are anticipated by the organisation leadership. Gap 3 happens when systems of service delivery (personnel, technologies and processes) do not observe standards guaranteed to customers. Gap 4 occurs when the company, via various media, claims a different service level than what they actually provide and do not fulfil promises

SERVQUAL or Gaps Model (Zeithaml Parasuraman Berry)



Scheme 1. SERVQUAL – Conceptual Model of Service Quality

Source: Parasuraman, A., Zeithaml, V. A. & Berry, L. L. (1985). A Conceptual Model of Service Quality and Its Implications for Future Research. *Journal of Marketing*, 49(4), 41–50.

advertised. The last gap 5 is the result of all gaps mentioned above. The size of gaps 1–4 is added up to a total difference between customers’ expectations and the company’s offer (see scheme 1).

The SERVQUAL method is based on differences between customers’ expectations and real perception of services provided. It is presented as a multidimensional construct.

Since its implementation, SERVQUAL has been used by many researchers. The researchers in the area of sport services either use the SERVQUAL tool directly (Howat et al, 1996; Wright et al, 1992), or modify it to be specifically adapted for the service and recreational sport industry (Crompton et al, 1991; McDonald et al, 1995; Wright et al., 1992). On its basis, several researchers were trying to develop a different quality structure for various segments of the sport industry (Howat et al, 1996; Kim & Kim, 1995).

Later on, other methods were developed from the SERVQUAL method, which are now further evolving. Authors of these methods confirm that customer satisfaction predestines their expectations; however, they claim that it is sufficient to measure only the quality of

services offered which a customer can actually perceive. Cronin and Tabor (1992) developed, on the basis of SERVQUAL dimensions, the worldwide-known tool SERVPERF (from service performance). Unlike SERVQUAL, this tool measures only perceived output. SERVPERF, similarly to SERVQUAL, measures service quality on the basis of five basic dimensions: reliability, responsiveness, empathy, assurance and tangibles.

Another method to evaluate service quality from the point of view of a customer is the Critical Incident Technique (CIT). This method was first used in the 1950's (Flanagan, 1954), but after several adjustments, it is still used by researchers today (Snellman & Vihtkari, 2003; Wong & Sohal, 2003). CIT serves to identify the origins of customer satisfaction or dissatisfaction with services provided. The method is based on conducting direct interviews with customers, who evaluate situations during offered service realization and reflect upon those situations which most significantly attract their attention. Another step is analysing these situations and their classifications. By fulfilling the following conditions, it is possible to evaluate a situation as critical:

- 1) The situation described is related to the interaction of a customer and an employee of the service provider.
- 2) The situation described causes feelings of customer satisfaction or dissatisfaction.
- 3) The event differs from ordinary routine practice.
- 4) The event description is accurate enough for the interviewer's precise picture.

Clients participating in this research are questioned about whether they remember any special event which occurred during service provision, when it happened, what the circumstances were, how the employee providing the certain service behaved, how long it took to solve that problem, and why that situation made the client satisfied (unsatisfied) with the service. The following research analysis was made by at least four independent specialists who created groups of mutually similar situations based on identical components. In these groups, the researchers examine the ratio of positive and negative events and the ratio among groups themselves using statistic methods. According to this research, there are several factors which positively or negatively influence the quality perception of services offered. Results of such a technique enable to provide service quality effectively with the help of appropriate tools in the marketing mix.

Other methods used by researchers to evaluate the quality of services provided are the American Customer Satisfaction Index (ACSI) and European Customer Satisfaction Index (ESCI). They represent two approaches in measurement: the American and European models. The European model (ECSI) is based on 7 interconnected indicators. Each indicator is described by certain variables evaluating a specific service:

1. Image
 - cornerstone in analysing customer satisfaction
 - determined by measured variables, e.g. company stability, overall confidence in company business, reason for the first company visit, etc.
2. Customer expectations
 - characterize customer expectations for a certain service; very often the expectation is an impact of previous experience or communication with the company
 - measurable variables: pleasant and clean company environment, service pricing, accessibility, etc.

3. Perceived quality (so-called outer quality)
 - related not only to the primary (basic) service but also to additional services (accompanying)
 - measurable variables: customer care, customer help with operating machines, way of conducting a lesson
4. Perceived value
 - connected with service price and expected benefit from it
 - measurable parameters: appearance and personnel willingness, instructors' qualification, etc.
5. Customer complaints
 - result of difference of higher expectation and lower actual service provided
 - measurable variables: frequency of complaints, willingness to handle, etc.
6. Customer satisfaction
 - customers are satisfied when their expectations are fulfilled
 - measurable variables: overall satisfaction, overall satisfaction of needs, satisfaction with employees behaviour, etc.
7. Customer loyalty
 - loyal customers repeatedly evaluate services provided better than their expectations were
 - measurable variables: repeated purchases, recommendations to other customers, etc.

DISCUSSION

The above mentioned authors agree that it is required to make the target customer feel that they received the service quality they expected. If the perceived service happens to be of lower level than the service expected, the customer loses interest in its provider. Therefore, the service provider must always identify customers' desires concerning the service quality. Unfortunately, defining the service quality is much harder than defining the product quality. However, customers will always evaluate the service quality, and the provider needs to know their expectations to be able to project and imply effective services. Simply said, customers will be satisfied only when they get what they want, when they want it, and how they want it.

Measuring service quality and customer satisfaction can help management decide which way to go while improving the effectiveness of their organisation. Measuring customer satisfaction is the most effective activity, while also fulfilling the so-called feedback principle. It is a fundamental principle of any effective management system to create informational channels through which customers' expected desires and expectations constantly reach the organisation, and how the provider satisfies such needs and expectations.

Procedures of measuring service quality can be divided into two fundamental styles. Styles using so-called output indicators of customers' perception enable companies to work with data gained as a reflection of direct customers' product perception, and procedures using so-called internal indicators of company's efficiency. These styles are based on data analysis from internal company databases which provide services to customers. The

indicators reflect how effectively processes are developed in the company, which directly underlines positive or negative customer perceptions.

Service quality or customer satisfaction is a frequent subject of marketing research, as well as theories and practices across various branches of business. There is much literature discussing the image of a satisfied customer (Anderson, Mittal, 2000; Iacobucci, Grayson & Ostrom, 1994; McCollough, Berry & Yadav, 2000; Patterson, 1995; Patterson & Spreng, 1998; Spreng, MacKenzie & Olshavsky, 1996 and others).

Despite the fact that some authors use terms such as “service quality” and “customer satisfaction” interchangeably, many authors agree that both constructions are different but mutually interconnected (Parasuraman, Zeithaml & Berry, 1988; Spreng & Mackoy, 1996; Taylor & Baker, 1994). According to Zeithamlová and Bittner (2000) “satisfaction” is a wider term than “service quality.” It includes both cognitive evaluation and effect evaluation (functional). But service quality evaluation is exclusively cognitive (Tian-Cole & Crompton, 2003). Many studies from marketing areas regard these two constructions as mutually firmly interconnected (Alexandris, Dimitriadis & Kasiara, 2001; Caruana, 2002; Spreng & Chiou, 2002).

Sport services are also subject matters of a wide range of research dealing with examining the extent of their influence on customer behaviour (Robledo, 2001; Walker, 1995; Bolton & Drew, 1991; Parasuraman, Zeithamlová & Berry, 1985; Grönroos, 1988). Knowledge of what customers expect from sport organizations and the level of their expectations enables service providers to determine whether the service is of acceptable quality.

However, evaluation of sport services quality level is often problematic. Sport organisations have many characteristics that distinguish them from other service organizations. Firstly, the cost of sport services is left to open consideration and can be considered a luxury. Secondly, customers usually participate in sport organizations in their free time. Finally, there may be an emotional investment involved when supporting a sport team, being its member, or going to a swimming club to boost health. These factors can, according to Robinson (2006), lead to much higher requirements or expectations from sport organizations, unlike other service providers.

Despite this notion of customer specific behaviour in sport, there are a growing amount of studies dealing with the concepts for sport services evaluation as well as their quality and customer satisfaction (Howat, Murray & Crilley, 1999; Kim & Kim, 1995; Macdonald, Sutton & Milne, 1995; Lentell, 2000; Woratschek, 2000; Theodorakis, Kambitsis, Laios & Koustelios, 2001).

In this article, we paid attention to research involving methods of evaluating service quality from customers’ points of view. Therefore, it is essential to add that in professional literature, there are other methods that focus on being able to define what service quality means to a customer, as well as elaborating strategies for how to meet customers’ expectations in order to keep them. As an example of such studies, we can point out QUESC (Kim & Kim 1995), CERM (Howat et al, 1996) for Australian clubs, REQUAL (MacKay & Crompton 1990) for sport services and TEAMQUAL (Macdonald, 1995) to measure quality in professional sports.

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ZÁKAZNÍKOVO VNÍMÁNÍ KVALITY SLUŽEB VE SPORTU

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SOUHRN

Tento článek přináší přehled literatury (This article is a review of the literature) vztahující se ke studiu kvality služeb ve sportu. Zaměřuje se zejména na služby, které poskytují svým zákazníkům rekreační sportovní zařízení, jako jsou například fitness a wellness centra. Práce poskytuje dosavadní teoretické poznatky o vnímání kvality služeb v rekreačním sportovním průmyslu. Představuje modely a metody, které jsou v odborné literatuře nejčastěji využívány pro lepší pochopení konstruktů sportovních služeb a k hodnocení jejich kvality. Tyto modely jsou založeny na současném vnímání kvality služeb, tedy že kvalita služeb je vícerozměrný a hierarchický koncept (multidimensional and hierarchical construct). Studie je určena k zamyšlení se nad koncepčními rozdíly ve výzkumech v oblasti kvality služeb. Poskytuje komplexní koncepční rámec pro další výzkumníky v oblasti sportovního managementu i pro odborníky z praxe.

Klíčová slova: review, sport, fitness, služby, kvalita, zákazník

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