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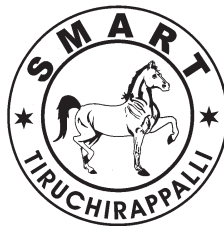**Dr. M. SELVAM,** M.Com., Ph.D.,
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SERVICE QUALITY GAP MODELS: A RE-EXAMINATION AND EXTENSION

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Abstract

This paper, drawing on several studies, presents a comprehensive Service Quality Gap (SQG) model that explains the areas to look for SQGs. Sixteen SQGs are outlined, some of which can be disaggregated, according to the organization's strategic quality dimensions, namely, strategy formulation, development and delivery. The 16 SQGs are major impediments to service quality. But at the same time, they prompt policy for makers to come out with essential tactics to deal and eliminate the SQGs so as to develop a long term relationship with the customers. The impact of SQGs on strategy formation and implementation makes it increasingly important for the CEO and staff planners of services marketing industry. Indeed these SQGs models and analyses are a major milestone in service marketing context. This paper, by reviewing the relevant literature in connection with SQGs, makes an honest attempt in reiterating its worth.

Introduction

Research in defining quality has been mainly developed in manufacturing sector (Llosa et al., 1998). Japan's philosophy is based on the zero defects concept whose definition is 'doing it right for the first time'. Crosby (1979), one of the early researchers in the field of service quality, defines quality as '**conformity to needs**'. However, research on quality in service sector, relatively speaking, is inadequate. This is perhaps due to the presence of three inherent characteristics; Intangibility, Heterogeneity and Inseparability between production and consumption (Parasuraman, Zeithaml & Berry 1985). Parasuraman et al [1988] are the seminal authors to offer quantitative norms to measure these perceptions and thereby pioneering a Service Quality Gap (SQG) model which in turn spurred many contributions down the line to service quality literature.

Conceptualisation Of Service Quality Gap Model

The construct of quality as conceptualized in the services literature involves perceived service quality. Perceived service quality is the consumer's judgment about an entity's overall excellence or superiority [Zeithaml 1987]. It differs from objective quality (as defined by, for example, Garvin (1983) and Hjorth- Anderson (1984); it is a form of attitude, related but not equivalent to satisfaction. SQG results from a comparison of expectations. Perception of performance is indeed conceived as service quality gap (Parasuraman, Zeithaml & Berry 1988), which is still treasured as a crucial property by service marketing practitioners.

Review of the Literature

Some of the most influential models in the service management literature (Gronroos, 1990; Parasuraman et al., 1985) focus on the concept of service quality gap (SQG). Parasuraman et al. (1985) define a pioneering model with five SQGs, the concepts which are amplified in Brogowicz et al. (1990) model. The latter has five types of encompassing gaps: information and feedback-related gaps; design-related gaps; implementation-related gaps; communication-related gaps; and customers' perceptions and expectations-related gaps. In addition to this model amplification, other authors (e.g. Brown & Swartz, 1989) have pointed out relevant SQGs , like the difference between organisation value system and functioning of the organisation resulting in the organisation functional gap (Norman and Ramirez,1993) that has not been considered previously.

This paper integrates the comprehensive model of service quality gaps proposed by Candido et al.(2001) and a group of SQGs dispersed through the literature in a new synthesised model. It draws a link between the model and the stages of a strategy process, emphasizing the SQGs' impact on the process, raising relevant research questions and throwing challenges to service marketers to act relentlessly on the issues raised.

SQGs Models:A Revisit

Several references to possible quality inconsistencies, some of which are explicitly formalized as SQGs, were collected from the literature and are listed in the rows of **Table 1**. The sources from where they are listed in the columns' headings, are indicated by a "♦" in the body of the table.

The inconsistencies are considered relevant SQGs on their own and the resulting group of 16 SQGs is reordered and renumbered in a logical sequence. These SQGs are defined and coherently integrated in Table 1 as part of a new SQG model. Before that, other elements of the model must be introduced.

Elements of the synthesized SQG model

The SQG model proposed here integrates contributions from various authors. **Figure-1** shows the model, incorporating the elements of the 16 SQGs identified. Definitions for the SQGs are outlined here :

Gap 1: Management perceptions

Zemke and Schaaf (1989) note that "left to [their] own devices, [managers and personnel] pay more and more attention to things of less and less importance to the customer". As a consequence, they remain blind to what customers actually value. Some of the 'devices' and causes for this blindness are managers' and personnel' education, habits developed over time and company policies and procedures, especially

relating to marketing research and communication (zeithaml at al., 1988; Zemke & Schaaf, 1989).

Gap 1 is defined here as a management's lack of understanding of customers' expectations and perceptions of the service, motivated by both lack of initiatives to listen to customers (Zemke & Schaaf, 1989) and by a lack of correct understanding when these initiatives are taken (Parasuraman at al., 1985). The gap can be further enlarged to include a lack of understanding of other external information.

Gap 2: Service quality strategy

Strategy relates the service organization to its environment and defines the way it wants to compete. Service quality strategy limits the organization's competitive scope and its concept of quality, through a selection of and positioning of the fundamental quality dimensions it wants to compete with (e.g. tangibles and empathy).

Quality dimensions are correlated (Parasuraman at al., 1988, 1991) and sometimes, an improvement in one may be achieved only at the expense of another (Garvi, 1987). The challenge is to choose a balanced combination and positioning (Garvin, 1987; Haywood-Farmer, 1988). Concentrating highly on some dimensions may also constitute an appropriate strategy but may lead to disaster (Haywood-Farmer, 1988).

Finally, service quality strategy is a set of guidelines that provide orientations for everyone in the organization. It should be thoroughly communicated, should be meaningful for personnel and should distinguish the organization from others. Failure to forge and communicate a coherent service quality strategy is a serious SQG.

Gap 3: Service design and service quality specifications in terms of customers' expectations.

Specifications, along with the strategic quality dimensions, are useful to define what quality is. Frequently, organizations do not

possess any kind of formal specifications, which result in aggravated service variability and lower quality (Zemke & Schaaf, 1989?). Specifications are required to guide personnel in their activities. Specifications are also required as a means of comparisons for effective quality evaluation. Setting adequate specifications do not mean total standardization but require an analysis and design of the total service, i.e. of every moment of truth. From these ideas, gap 3 is defined as:

- a lack of analysis, design and definition of service quality specifications, or when specifications exist;

- an inconsistency between those specifications and the strategy content or the perceptions management holds of customers' expectations.

  Several factors can trigger this gap. For instance, lack of management commitment to service quality and short-term profit orientation (Zeithaml et al., 1988).

Gap 4: Service gaps

- The ambient conditions such as temperature, ventilation, noise, odour etc., prevailing in the organisation premises.(Sureshchandar et al. 2001)

- Physical layout of equipment and other furnishings to enable comfortable interaction with customers.

- House keeping and visually appealing signs, symbols, advertisement boards, pamphlets and other artifacts of the organisation.

  Failure to identify and develop these things in the light of customer requirement will certainly activate a SQG.

Gap 5: Quality supportive financial function

Although a vital function to the service organization, finance involves little customer contact, execct for billing payment and credit activities (Lovelock, 1992). This is one reason why it has been neglected in the service literature. Financial management, in the field of service organizations, has also been a constraint and an obstacle to other functions (Adams & Colebourne, 1989).

Adams and Colebourne (1989) suggest an 'enlightened' approach to finance in the field of service organizations. This consists of more participative and positive approach where far from being an obstacle, it contributes to strategic planning, costing systems, personnel motivation, quality control, continued solvency, and keeping outsiders' confidence in management (Adam & Colebourne 1989).

In particular, there is a need to distinguish 'good costs' that improve organizational capabilities from 'bad costs' that tighten bureaucracy (Gronoos, 1990). Doing this will, probably, require a substantial effort, undertaking, co-operation and goodwill from financial managers and personnel to avoid traditional methods and arguments.

Gap 6: Internal communications

Zemke & Schaaf (1989) insist that service strategy has to be communicated over and over again to everyone; the "employee at all levels must be aligned with a single vision of what the organization is trying to accomplish". Effective internal communications is essential for integration and harmony in the service organization's activities and quality. Internal communications is not just about strategy, it has to do with managers listening to employees, receiving feedback about the employees' perceptions of the organization's performance on its fundamental quality dimensions. It also involves: managers working with and listening to other managers, thus sharing problems and solutions; managers giving information to employees, about their individual performances, thus contributing to individual improvements;

and prompt horizontal and vertical communications, thus flattening and inverting the hierarchical pyramid (Gronroos, 1990; Irons, 1994).

Gap 7: Integration/co-ordination

Integration between every employee, every activity, every department and every function is fundamental for service quality strategy's success. The need for integration efforts arises from the differentiation of jobs and functions in the organizations. This differentiation implies differences in cost/revenue orientations, policies and specific external environments, which can easily lead to misunderstandings, lack of co-ordination and even conflict (Lawrence & Lorsch, 1967; Lovelock, 1992). Integration can be achieved through several distinct devices like promoting employees' mobility inside the organization, cross-training, task forces, team projects, supervision and basically, good internal communications (cf. Larence & Lorsh, 1967: Lovelock, 1992; Mintzberg, 1979). There are two sides to integration. One is that every job, activity, department and function should be compatible and mutually reinforcing (Lovelock, 1992; Normann, 1995), the other is that customers must never feel ignored, unimportant or abandoned, for example, repeatedly sent from one department to another for no good reason (Gronroos, 1990; Lovelock, 1992).

Gap 8: Co-ordination of other people and/or organizations in the value system

External co-ordination is also fundamental. If the external organizations and the value system are not organized to provide service quality to the final consumer, this lack of understanding and co-ordination can result in poorer customer perceptions. Normann and Ramirez (1993) report that several organizations have achieved a total reconfiguration of the value constellation to which they belong, with benefits to every member of the network and consumers. Thus, Normann (1995) suggests that service firms "have to extend their organizing capability well outside their own company"; that they have to 'organize' their client; and that they can benefit from doing the same even with "groups or sectors normally regarded as separate.

Gap 9: Selection, training, and adequate level of autonomy, power and rewards to personnel

The importance of functional quality in service industries makes HR management highly important. HR management involves selection, training, giving adequate levels of autonomy, setting standards/ objectives, assessing individual performance, helping people where help is needed and finally, rewarding them for their achievements. The right people should be selected and the tendency to recruit hastily, accepting candidates with inadequate attitudes, values and skills, should be avoided (Zemke & Schaaf, 1989). Selected people are trained to enhance skills, improve attitudes towards customers and learn about the services offered. These people can be slowly vested with substantial responsibility, enabling them to solve customer problems in a more autonomous and satisfactory way to both parties (Irons, 1994; Zemke & Schaaf, 1989). Contact personnel are encouraged to feed back information about customers' expectations and perceptions. Finally, personnel are rewarded for excellent service quality and their achievement is made public (Zemke & Schaaf, 1989). Inability or unwillingness to coherently manage personnel constitutes a significant SQG.

Gap 10 : Service delivery

Service delivery is an inconsistency between service design/service quality specifications and the service quality realised actually by the service delivery system. The inconsistency may be technical quality and/or process quality-related. It can be analyzed more

precisely using the strategic quality dimensions selected. This means that on each of these dimensions can be found a SQG. Thus, gap 9.1 to 9.N can be defined, N being the number of strategic quality dimensions. Gap 9.1 for example, might be a difference between the designed level of reliability and the level of reliability actually delivered by the system (see Brogowicz et al. (1990). Disaggregation of Parasuraman et al. (1985) gap 5). Gap 9 can, consequently, be defined as a function of gaps 9.1 to 9.N. Such gaps result from employees' inability or unwillingness to perform (Zeithaml et al., 1988).

Gap 11: External communications

External communications is an inconsistency between what is externally communicated (promised) and what the service delivery system is actually able to provide the customers with. Several factors may contribute to the origin of the gap: a lack of communication between the Marketing Department and the Operations Department, a propensity to overpromise (Zeithaml et al., 1988), or an inability to communicate clearly and accurately the benefits of the service offered to the customers (Brogowicz et al., 1990).

In order to use adequately and to appreciate fully the choices that the organization offers, the customer has to be in possession of accurate and comprehensive information. It may be necessary to use more than one communication means to inform, persuade and educate the customer. Designing services to be user friendly will simultaneously facilitate consumer use and external communication.

Gap 12: Contact personnel's perceptions of customers' expectations

This gap consists of a discrepancy between the contact personnel's perceptions of customers' expectations and the customers' real expectations (Brown & Swartz, 1989).

Gap 13: Contact personnel's perceptions of customers' experiences

Similar to the previous gap 12, it consists of a discrepancy between the contact personnel's perceptions of customers' experiences and the customers' real experiences (Brown & Swartz, 1989).

These gaps can have most impact on professional services, where "professional' perceptions most directly affect the design and delivery of the services offered" (Brown & Swartz, 1989). But, even in other services, theses gaps can have a significant impact because they address the need of contact employees to understand a customers' expectations and experiences. Specifically, when gap 11 is nil, the employee will have evaluated correctly the customers' expectations, and when gap 12 is nil, his perceptions. In conjunction, theses two gaps will affect the contact employee's perceptions of his interlocutor's assessment of the quality he is being provided with and the employee's subsequent behaviour.

Gap 14 : Human Element

- Providing services as per the promised schedule (Sureshchandar et al.,2000)
- Making the customers feel safe, secure, satisfied and delighted in their transactions
- Extent to which the feedback from customers used to improve the service standards
- Effectiveness of customers grievance procedures and processes.

Any discrepancy in the performance of these parameters involving human elements to the core will invariably result in SQGs.

Gap 15 :Consumer perceptions

Consumer perception is the difference between what consumers expect from the service and what they actually perceive of it. The need for managers to assess customers' expectations and their perceptions of the quality provided should be emphasized here.

Such an assessment should be constant or, at least, periodic. It should encompass the totality of the service offered, i.e. including every moment of truth and it should be done for each of the strategic quality dimensions. Gap 13, thus, can be disaggregated into gaps 13.1 to 13.*N*, according to the *N* strategic quality dimensions, just as suggested for gap 9.

Gap 16: Service quality evaluation

Setting standards is not sufficient to ensure that a quality service is being offered. Accurate measures are essential for monitoring and for effective quality management. Measuring is an objective way to monitor service quality but personal observation is also important. This should not be confounded with 'police action'. Several methods can be used to measure quality. However, the best measurements are those devised to "mirror and validate the details of [the organization's] service strategy" (Zemke & Schaaf, 1989). Standards are set according to essential strategy elements and measurements must focus on the same fundamental variables (Gravin. 1987).

SQGs and Managerial Implications

This literature survey in connection with the Service Quality Gap models shows that gap analysis is an appropriate technique that could help the service managers measure service quality through the measurement of gap between customer expectations and their perception (P-E)of service performance. **Table-2** outlines the three simple stages of the strategy process where the gaps are most likely to occur. Gaps 1 to 7 can occur with regard to discerning customers' needs and strategy. Gaps 3 to 8 can occur during development of the organization's capabilities. Finally, gaps 5 to 16 can occur during day-to-day delivery activities.

If any group of SQGs occurs during strategy formulation or implementations, the process is flawed. In that case, it is probable that the SQGs will become engraved in the organizational processes, routines and culture. All the subsequent organizational activity will be severely affected; the strategy implementation will become unsuccessful; and the organization's competitiveness will be endangered. This reasoning indicates that some SQGs might be conceptualized both as impediments to quality and as impediments to effective strategy implementation. It also suggests that prevention and elimination of SQGs should occur previous to, during and after the strategy process. Thus, an understanding of SQGs becomes necessary before starting any quality strategy formulation and implementation process.

This line of reasoning raises some questions: How are the SQGs related to the process of strategy formulation and implementation? What more specific stages are causally involved in the strategy process? What gaps can occur at those more specifically defined stages? What organizational variables are affected by each gap? What organizational variables can be used to prevent and eliminate the gaps? At what stages? Is the manipulation of organizational variables at one specific stage capable of eliminating any specified gap? Will the gap recur?

Addressing these gaps are logical basis for formulating strategies and tactics [Kwan and Hee, 1993] to ensure consistent expectations and experiences, thus enhancing customer satisfaction and positive quality evaluation. This further helps the management decision maker to come out with proper segmentation analysis and in the bargain, enabling them to be more targeted in their marketing efforts.

Conclusion

The issues addressed in this study suggest that The SQ Gap concept can be conceptualized and understood further through comprehensive SQ Gap Model and the managers may need to emphasise customer satisfaction program and strategies centering SQ Gap Model. Perhaps consumers do not buy the highest quality

service [Cronin & Taylor (1992)]; convenience, price and availability may enhance satisfaction while not actually affecting consumer's perceptions of service quality. Gap Model has emphasized the need for developing strategy addressing these critical issues. In this way, service marketers and managers armed with a more complete and holistic view of service quality will be better able to focus service enhancement, planning and resource allocation. Nevertheless this Service Quality Gap Model is not an all encompassing one as many authors [for eg. Alfred, 2001] suggest. There are several other models and numbers of service gaps, calling for further enquiry. In other words, further research exploring the relationship between Service Quality Gaps and Customer Oriented Strategy formulation is clearly necessary and appropriate.

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Figure1: Service quality gap model

Source: Candido & Morris, 2001
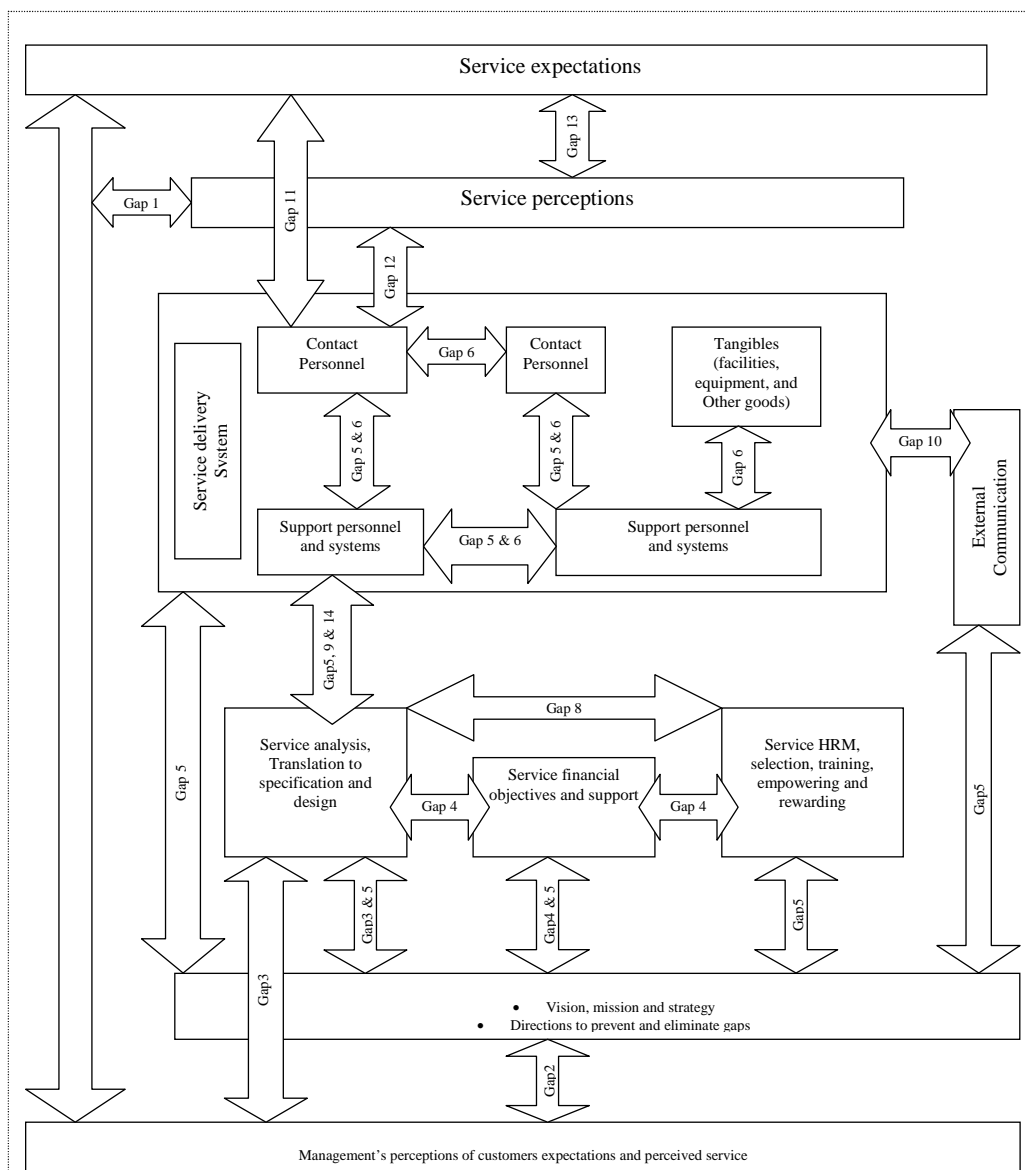
Source: Candido & Morris, 2001

Table 1: Quality gaps drawn from the literature

Gap Number	Inconsistency /gap	Parasuraman et al., 1985	Grőnroos, 1990	Gummesson & Grőnroos, 1987	Lovelock, 1992	Garvin, 1987	Brogowicz et al., 1990	Brown & Swartz, 1989	Normann & Ramirez, 1993	Suresh chander
1	Management perceptions	◆	◆		❂	◆	◆			◆
2	Service quality strategy		◆			◆				◆
3	Service design and service specifications in terms of customers' expectations	◆	◆	◆	❂	◆	◆			
4	Servicescape									◆
5	Quality supportive financial function				◆					
6	Internal communications		◆	◆						
7	Integration/coordination	◆	◆	◆	◆					
8	Coordination of other people and value system								◆	◆
9	Selection, training, power and rewards to personnel		◆		◆					
10	Service delivery	◆	◆	◆	❂	◆	◆			◆
11	External communications	◆	◆		◆		◆			
12	Contact personnel's perceptions of customers' expectations	✧	✧	✧	✧	✧	✧	◆		
13	Contact personnel's perceptions of customers' experiences	✧	✧	✧	✧	✧	✧	◆		
14	Human element									◆
15	Consumer perceptions	◆	◆	◆			◆	◆		
16	Service quality evaluation		◆		◆	◆				

Table 2: Relationships between the stages of the strategy process and the SQGs

Gap Number	Gap that can occur in or arise for three stages of the process	Stages of the strategy process		
		Formulation (Discern)	Implementation (Develop)	Deliver the service to delight
1	Management perceptions	✦	✦	
2	Service quality strategy	✦	✦	
3	Service design and service specifications in terms of customers' expectations	✦	✦	
4	Servicescape	✦	✦	✦
5	Quality supportive financial function	✦	✦	
6	Internal communications	✦	✦	✦
7	Integration/coordination	✦	✦	✦
8	Coordination of other people and/or organizations in the value system	✦	✦	✦
9	Selection, training, and adequate levels of autonomy, power and rewards to personnel		✦	✦
10	Service delivery			✦
11	External communications			✦
12	Contact personnel's perceptions of customers' expectations			✦
13	Contact personnel's perceptions of customers' experiences			✦
14	Human Element			✦
15	Consumer perceptions			✦
16	Service quality evaluation			✦