

SERVICE QUALITY AND ITS CONCEPTUAL ADVANCEMENT: A HOLISTIC REVIEW

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ABSTRACT

The entire gambit of business performance in the last decade-and-a-half has faced a paradigm shift, with quality consistently being considered as one of management's top-most competitive priorities and a prerequisite for sustenance and growth. Quality is proposed as the most potent tool for enhanced business performance. In today's world of fierce competition, rendering quality service is a key for subsistence and success in any organisation, more so in a service organisation in the airline sector.

The cardinal accent of both academia and business focused essentially on ascertaining the customers' perceptions of service quality and subsequently contriving strategies to meet and surmount customer expectancies. The study aims to contribute to the research on service quality via discussion of the principal literature relating to the evolution of service quality by analysing almost 35 years' research on the subject.

Major international academic databases have been consulted. The paper summarises some theoretical-conceptual and methodological-operational critical aspects identified by various scholars within the existing mass of knowledge of the theme of study. The study primarily intends to present a conceptual overview of service quality, its applicability, and benefits together with understanding the various facets of service components. The paper sums up by discussing the conclusions of this study along with scope for future research.

KEYWORDS

Services, Services Marketing, Service Quality, Servqual, Customer Satisfaction etc.

INTRODUCTION: THE GENESIS

In the present age and times, the hair-splitting demarcation between manufacturing and the service sectors is getting blurred by the day since the existence and survival of the one entails the other. There cannot be one without the other as they are interlaced as supplementary and complimentary aspects of modern businesses.

The focal point of initial corporate attention in the 1970s was directed towards the manufacturing sector – found to be effective in improving production and lowering manufacturing costs as well as gaining competitive advantage (Garvin, 1983). The role of quality has always been an important issue in the products and services. With the environment becoming more competitive and turbulent, service industries are increasingly concerned with obtaining a sustainable competitive edge (Collins, 1996).

Services marketing was the precursor leading to the study of service quality. It was beginning to be recognised as an industry function in the early- to mid-1970s. Empirical research was limited in the early days as marketing struggled with the differences between this new service sector and the conventional marketing methods for the marketing of manufactured goods.

George and Barksdale (1974) pioneered research in this area by identifying several distinct differences between the marketing of service firms and manufacturing firms and found an unusual concept in the service firms in that the marketing effort was not confined to a formal marketing department, but was shared across organisational lines. The manufacturing firm, by contrast, operated with a more clearly delineated marketing department.

Services are intangible, rendered, experienced, and unable to be stored and services should be marketed differently from tangible

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products (Shostack, 1977). This research brought to the fore the distinct nature of services marketing and gave equal weight to the components of *service* as it did to *product*. Her research concluded that service marketing strategies should deal with specific issues related to distinct elements within each product. Further, changes in any single element could impact other elements within the function, and as such, services marketing should consider products more holistically, implying to look at each item on its merits alone.

Lovelock (1983) took the intangible services marketing function and broke it down to the specific service function, and then established service classifications that emphasised the fact that service oriented organisations could be quite different from each other.

The limited research that followed viewed marketing management as a function/task, and did not embrace the services marketing approach across the organisation. However, subsequent research provided evidence that suggested organisational culture has a significant influence on organisational behaviour.

SERVICE QUALITY: ETYMOLOGY, DEFINITION, AND BEYOND

Etymology: The etymological origin and derivation of service quality could be attributed thus:

Service

Literally, comes from the Latin verb *servire* which means to “be a servant, be in service, be enslaved;” *Figuratively*, it purports to “be devoted; be governed by; comply with; conform; flatter;” *Originally*, it connoted “be a slave,” branching from the Latin verb *servus* “slave.”

Quality

Stemming from the Latin *qualitatem* (nominative *qualitas*), it signifies “a quality, property; nature, state, condition;” from Latin *qualis* “of what sort?/what kind of a?”

Definition: Services have been defined in many ways but with no general agreement as to what really constitute services. But before drawing attention towards the varieties of definitions on services, it is important to draw distinction on different categories of services. Service could be categorised into four distinct clusters (Zeithaml et al., 1996) (see Table-1):

Service Industries and Companies

Whose core product is a service, e.g. hotels (lodging), airlines/railways (transportation), banks (financial services), universities (education), etc.

Services as Product

Range of intangible product offerings that customers value and pay for in the marketplace, e.g. information technology (IT) consulting services offered by professional/technical entities.

Customer Service

Service provided in support of a company’s core product, e.g. maintenance of equipment, installation of machine (air conditioner) or e-gadget (laptop software), on- and off-site services, customer care centres, etc.

Derived Service

Value derived from physical goods, e.g. razor provides barbering services, computer provides information and data manipulation services, drugs and medicines provide medical services, etc.

Table-1: Dissimilar Definitions of Service

Author(s)	Definition
Cowell (1984)	Activities, benefits, or satisfactions, which are offered for sale or are provided in connection with the sale of goods.
Stanton (1986)	Those separately identified, and essentially intangible, activities that provide want of

	satisfaction and that are not necessarily tied to the sale of a product or another service.
Gummersson (1987)	Something that can be bought and sold, but which you cannot drop on your foot.
Quinn et al. (1987)	All economic activities whose output is not physical product or construction, is generally consumed at the time it is produced and provides benefit in forms that are essentially intangible.
Kotler & Turner (1993)	Any kind of performance that one party can offer to another that is essentially intangible and does not result in the ownership of anything.
Zeithaml et al. (1996)	Services are deeds, processes, and performances.
Lovelock & Wirtz (2004)	An economic activity that creates value and provides benefits for customers at specific times and places by bringing about a desired change in, or on behalf of, recipient of the service.
Edvardsson et al. (2005)	A value co-creating processes with customers.
Karwan & Markland (2006)	A package made up of a set of tangible and intangible elements.
Bygstad & Lanestedt (2009)	Services are a non-material equivalent of goods.

Sources: Authors Compilation

DISTINCTIVE CHARACTERISTICS OF SERVICES

Services have basically six innate characteristics that greatly affect the design of marketing programmes (Hope & Muhlemann, 1997).

Intangibility

Unlike physical products, service has no physical attributes, and, hence, cannot be seen, tasted, felt, heard, or smelled before they are bought. To reduce uncertainty, buyers will look for signs or evidence of the service quality e.g. the reputation of a service organisation and its representatives to judge quality (Dotchin & Oakland, 1994). They will draw inferences about quality from the place, people, equipment, communication material, symbols, and price that they see. Therefore, the service provider's task is to "manage the evidence," to "tangibilise the intangible" (Levitt, 1981). Product marketers are challenged to add abstract ideas, whereas service marketers are challenged to add physical evidence and imagery to abstract offers. In general, service marketers must be able to transform intangible services into concrete benefits.

Inseparability

Services have the hallmark of simultaneity as they are typically produced and consumed at the same time, unlike physical goods, which are manufactured, put into inventory, distributed through resellers, and consumed later. If a person renders the service, then the provider is part of the service. Because the client is also present as the service is produced, provider-client interaction is a special feature of services marketing – both provider and client affect the outcome. The provider of service must first diagnose individual customer expectations then customise the service on the basis of the diagnosis (Morris & Johnston, 1987). Often, buyers of services have strong provider preferences and several strategies exist for getting around this limitation. *One* is higher pricing in line with the provider's limited time. *Another* is having the provider work with larger groups or work faster. A *third* alternative is to train more service providers and build up client confidence.

Inconsistency

Also called *variability/heterogeneity*, because services depend on who provides them, when, and where they are provided, they are highly variable. Knowing this, service firms can take three steps towards quality control. *First*, recruiting the right service employees and providing them with excellent training – this is crucial regardless of whether employees are highly skilled professionals or low-skilled workers. *Second*, standardise the service-performance process throughout the organisation – could be done by preparing a flowchart depicting every service event and process. Using this flowchart, management can identify potential fail points and then plan improvements. *Third*, monitor customer satisfaction through suggestion and complaint systems, customer surveys, and comparison shopping. Sasser et al. (1978) point out that there exist differences in the outputs of service provider producing the same service over a time within the same organisation – the interaction between customer and provider may vary by customer making it all the more difficult to set precise quantifiable standards for all of the elements of service.

Inventory

Also known as *perishability*, services are produced and consumed simultaneously which prompt the elimination of inventory implying services cannot be saved, stored, resold, or returned. Once an airplane takes off or a movie starts, any unsold seats cannot be held for future sale. Perishability is not a problem when demand for a service is steady, but fluctuating demand can cause problems. Public transportation companies owning much more equipment because of higher rush-hour demand is a case in point. Thus, perishability coerces the simultaneity of service production and service delivery.

Customer Participation

Service production is not a one-sided activity. Customers are co-producers of service. The production quality of the service greatly depends upon the ability, skill, and performance of the employees as well as the ability and performance of the customer. In the service interaction, although the employee and the customers are not equal part of production, the role of the customer cannot be overemphasised. Service firms should make the customers aware of the service package and the production process through proper communication media. They should take necessary steps to train customers, if necessary, to provide quality experience of the service. Perfection from the organisation's side alone in service production cannot ensure positive results unless the consumers are involved with the process. Therefore, specific and special orientation to different groups of customers is necessary.

Non-Ownership

Service consumers will have experiences, but not ownership. Since the services are intangible and perishable, the question of ownership does not arise. But these characteristics will make the job of the service marketer more problematic. Convincing the customer with tangible goods on which s/he will have ownership through transfer of title is much easier than selling an experience where nothing remains after consumption, except the memory of it.

The characteristics described above distinguish services marketing from goods marketing approach. Their marketing challenges are over and above the scope of goods marketing. This needs to be addressed by the service firms with a different strategic approach. This does not mean that traditional marketing philosophies, methods, and techniques are totally irrelevant to the service sector.

In fact, the fundamentals of marketing are the same to both the sectors. What is required is the development of an adaptable mechanism to a different environment, keeping in view the service characteristics. Thus, services marketing is nothing but the application of traditional marketing philosophies to the service sector with changes wherever required.

SECTORAL CLASSIFICATION OF AN ECONOMY

The value-driven pillars of an economy are the tri-sectors viz.: the primary (agriculture and allied businesses: fisheries, forestry, mining, and quarrying), the secondary (manufacturing and industry), and the tertiary (service). Of these, the agricultural sector has been overlooked due to the charisma of the industrial sector in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, while it was once again ignored owing to the intellectual chutzpah of the service sector.

All the same, the power of the primary sector could not be overlooked for long, as it is the sector, which feeds all the others. For the curious mind, the taxonomic nomenclature of the sectors is thus long-established for the simple reason that in Latin the ordinal numbers *primus* means "first", *secundus* means "second", and *tertius* means "third" (Harish, 2016).

The economic development of a country is assessed based on the gross domestic product (GDP), at nominal value, contributions of these sectors. Archetypically, the contribution of the primary sector overwhelms the other two in case of underdeveloped countries; secondary sector, through its exports, predominates the other two in the developing countries; and the tertiary sector were in charge over the other sectors in a developed economy (see Figure-1).

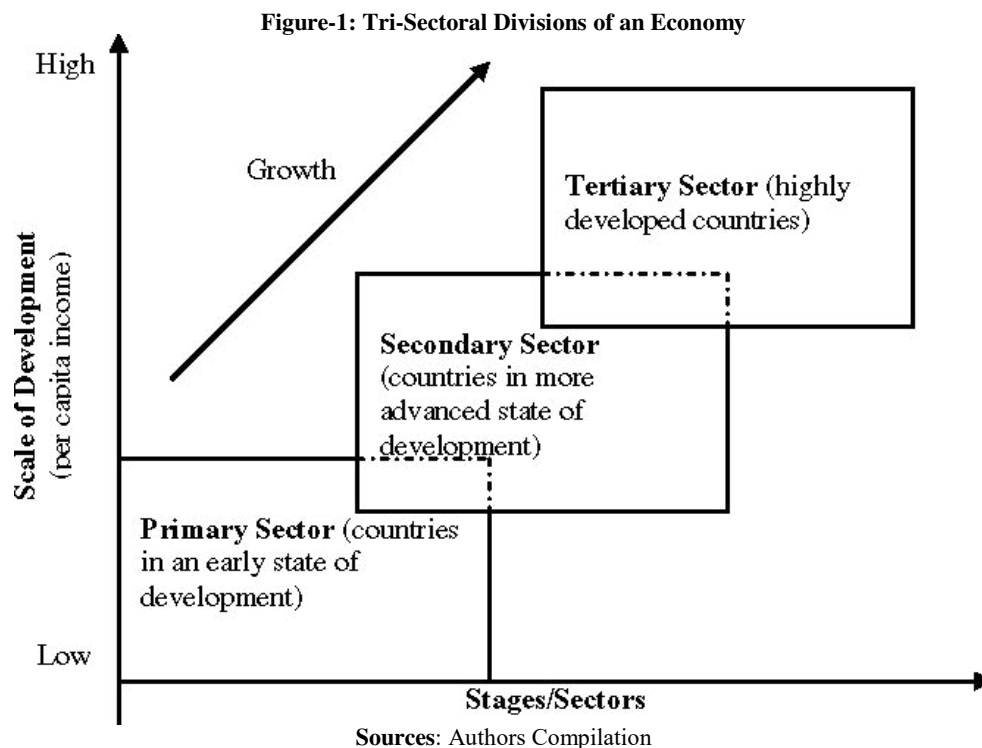
SERVICES: AN OVERVIEW

The evolutionary philosophy of service quality which stands as a testimony today is due to the pioneering contributions made by many a thinker, scholar, and practitioner. A review of the extant literature on service quality has been undertaken.

Since the early 1980s various service systems have been emerging based on different criteria; four of these are truly worth mentioning:

- (i) Chase (1978) segments by the extent of customer contact in the delivery of the service;
- (ii) Schmenner (1986) classifies services using two dimensions – the degrees of interaction and customisation on one axis and the degree of labour intensity on the other;
- (iii) Lovelock (1983) proposes classification of services into five distinctive categories – nature of service, relationships, judgement, demand pattern, and delivery method – based on what a service organisation is actually processing and how does it perform that task; and
- (iv) Wemmerlov (1990) presents the variables of differentiation as the degree of routinisation of the process, the 'object' of the service process and customer contact.

Besides the four aforementioned service system schemes, Liu & Wang (2008) classify the structures of the previous classifications of services based on the schemes concepts, i.e. discrete item scheme, continuum scheme, and matrix scheme.



Lusch & Vargo (2008) perceive services as supplements to physical goods and referred as good-dominant logic, where tangible goods are the primary focus of economic exchange. While Lovelock & Wirtz (2007) formulated non-ownership-based service paradigm underlying in it the marketing exchanges, not resulting in a transfer of ownership from seller to buyer are different from those that do.

Another study by Gebaver et al. (2008) suggested a comparable classification for business services, where services are divided into three groups: customer services, product-related services, and customer support services.

Katzan (2008) speaks about information services – a resource capable of supporting a service event based on information. Aside from the above, other studies on service system schemes and classification are by Mayer et al. (2003), Schmenner (2004), and Edvardsson et al. (2005). Selected schemes for service classifications are summarised in Table-2.

Table-2: Schemes for Service Classifications

Reference(s)	Dimension(s) of Classification
Chase (1978)	Extent of customer contact in the delivery of service
Lovelock (1983)	Nature of service, relationships, judgement, demand pattern, and delivery method
Schmenner (1986)	Degree of interaction/customisation and labour intensity
Wemmerlov (1990)	Degree of routinisation of the process, the object of the service process, and customer contact
Mayer et al. (2003)	A two-dimensional model comprising of: fixed (structural) descriptors and variable (situational) descriptors
Schmenner (2004)	Degree of variation of customisation and interaction, relative throughput time
Lovelock & Wirtz (2007)	Distinction between marketing through services or service marketing, product-related services and service as a product
Gebaver et al. (2008)	Business services for growth of product, customer services, product-related, services and customer support services
Liu & Wang (2008)	Discrete item scheme, continuum scheme, and matrix scheme
Lusch & Vargo (2008)	Service-dominant logic, where tangible goods are the primary focus of economic exchange
Godlevskaja et al. (2011)	Services categorisation schemes are grouped under eight service paradigms: Goods/Manufacturing vs. Services, Contemporary Service Industries, Non-Ownership Service, Goods-Focused, Services-for-Growth, Service-Focused, Relationship, and Service in Automated Environment

Sources: Authors Compilation

CHRONOLOGY OF SERVICE QUALITY RESEARCH

Service quality has been the subject of considerable interest by both practioners and researchers in recent years (Parasuraman et al 1985). An important reason for the interest in service quality by practitioners results from the belief that this has a beneficial effect on bottom line performance for the firm.

Only within the last few years has there been much research conducted in the area of determining whether customer satisfaction influences behavioural tendencies more than service quality does or the opposite prevails. Perhaps, the issue revolves around the ongoing debate as to whether satisfaction precedes service quality or vice versa?

Customers, over the years, have felt some level of comfort by an adequate amount of attention. The earliest concern for what has come to be known as service quality appeared in 1976. Marketing researchers did not share their need for substantial research of the quality issue until the early 1980s. However, the study of service quality did not come into its own as an area of marketing importance until research in the early 1980s established that attitude was a significant part of service quality.

Table-3 describes the general chronology of service quality research encompassing the list of eminent researchers and the research issues they raised over the time.

Table-3: Chronology of Service Quality Research

Year	Researcher(s)	Research Issue(s)
1976	Anderson et al.	Recognised importance of selection as priority for obtaining and retaining customers.
1982	Churchill & Surprenant	Service satisfaction is similar to attitude.
1982	Gronroos	Significance of processes and outcomes in defining service quality. Alluded to satisfaction as being similar to attitude.
1983	Lewis & Booms	Also noted significance of processes and outcomes in defining service quality. Difference in service quality and attitude is seen as general, comprehensive appraisal of some specific product or service.

1985	Holbrook & Corfman	Defined perceived quality as a global value judgement.
1985	Maynes	Viewed service quality as the extent to which a product offers the characteristics that individual desires.
1985	Parasuraman et al.	Established ten service quality determinates known as SERVQUAL: tangibles, reliability, responsiveness, communication, credibility, security, competence, courtesy, understanding / knowing the customer, and access.
1988	Parasuraman et al.	After substantial factor analysis and testing, reduced the ten service quality determinates in SERVQUAL to five: reliability, assurance, tangibles, empathy, and responsiveness.
1988	Zeithaml et al.	Noted that firms not only have a difficult time delivering a consistent level of quality service, but had difficulty understanding what service quality really entails. Perceived service quality as an attitude. Found through focus groups that good service quality as meeting customer expectations.
1990	Bitner	Noted research yielded service quality as being similar to attitude.
1991	Babakus & Mangold	Developed serious reservations about SERVQUAL's scales: reliability and discriminant validity.
1992	Cronin & Taylor	Found that perceptions of service quality more closely approach customer evaluations of services provided.
1992	Howcroft	Noted customer preferences of service quality based upon comparison between expectations and actual service performance.
1993	Teas	Found interpretation of SERVQUAL expectations was flawed.
1993	Brown et al.	Questioned whether five key dimensions capture all possible determinants of service quality.
1993	Parasuraman et al.	Disagreed with Brown et al. Research supports disconfirmation as valid since it allows service providers to establish gaps in provided service.
1994	Cronin & Taylor	Found fault with SERVQUAL and developed SERVPERF based upon consumer satisfaction exerts stronger influence on purchase intentions that does service quality.
1994 1996 1996	Taylor & Baker Dabholkar et al. Spreng & Mackoy	All used multi-item measures to ascertain overall service quality with factors as antecedents.
1996	Buttle	Questioned face validity and construct validity of SERVQUAL.
2000	Dabholkar et al.	Found perceptions and measured disconfirmation are more advantageous than computed disconfirmation.
2000	Bahia & Nantel	Devised measurement system modifying SERVQUAL to examine specific service context on a 6-dimension scale called BSQ. Researchers admitted BSQ had limitations.
2000	Beckett et al.	Developed consumer behaviour matrix to determine impact of electronic-based delivery systems on service/service quality.
2000	Oppewal & Vriens	Used integrated conjoint experiments to measure perceived level of service quality to avoid measurement pitfalls of SERVQUAL.
2001	Newman	Acknowledged acceptance of SERVQUAL, but questioned composition of sample and insensitivity to customer.

Sources: Authors Compilation

Churchill & Suprenant (1982) were among the earliest to hold the view later shared by others and were the first researchers to see the significance of attitude as a principal factor leading to superior service quality.

Lewis & Booms (1983) concluded that satisfaction was similar to attitude, and consequently noted the significance of processes and outcomes in defining service quality. In addition, they did not directly state, rather they alluded to satisfaction as being similar

to attitude. The difference between service quality and attitude is that service quality is seen as a general, comprehensive appraisal of some product or service.

By contrast it was noted by Gronroos (1982) that service marketing had followed two distinctly different paths. In his view, based on empirically reliable research, service when taken alone is indeed physically intangible. It does not matter if it is an airline service or a restaurant service; service occurs when someone does something for the customer in either case. He concluded that the act of something being done for the customer was the significant element in satisfying the customer, and this act did not have to involve a person performing the act rather it was simply a matter of the *firm* relying upon physical or technical resources doing something for the customer with the customer cooperating by consuming the *service*.

Holbrook & Corfman (1985) expanded on the concept of an act being performed and defined perceived quality as a global value judgement. They indicated that quality does by its nature seem to express general approval.

Maynes (1985) took a different approach by bringing service quality back to the earliest held views that service quality was the extent to which a product offers the characteristics that the individual desires. He differed from the earlier views in that he saw quality as a normative concept that could equip the consumer function effectively in the marketplace. Additionally, he felt that quality could best be measured and defined using quality as a weighted average of characteristics. This added element of mathematical measurement of quality was the earliest attempt to quantify service quality.

Maynes' attempt to quantify service quality paved the way for the development of some of the most significant measurement techniques.

Parasuraman et al. (1985) sought to improve the previously developed methods by developing a set of firm characteristics that could be measured by providing the first complete set of ten service quality determinants, which after substantial factor analysis and testing were reduced to five: reliability, assurance, tangibles, empathy, and responsiveness (Parasuraman et al., 1988).

Zeithaml et al. (1988) noted that firms not only have a difficult time delivering a consistent level of quality service even though it improves the profit level for firms providing services, but also understanding specifically what service quality really entails.

Bitner (1990) held the view that perceived service quality was similar to attitude. She noted that customer focus groups universally found good service quality as meeting the expectations of the customer.

CONCLUSION

The common element that can be derived from the numerous researchers is that various methodologies exist which allows service quality to be measured. Additionally, it could be measured from several perspectives. The greatest area for dispute is what constitutes the best and most accurate method for measurement of service quality. While the issue is sometimes clouded, it is reasonable to conclude that there is a consensus among the various researchers with regard to service quality.

The article is a conceptual paper whose main objective is to understand the state of art of the research studies on service quality evolution identifying future paths of study. The success or failure of service systems largely depends on the initiatives and enthusiasm of members constituting the service organisation. Consequently, the implementing organisations must have patience since it is a long-term process and requires major changes in the cultural aspects as well as the employee mindset; thus, the more rigorous the implementation, the better the business performance paving the path for achieving better results. Be that as it may, the following initiatives need to be taken:

- Identify – Key Areas of Service and Key Practices.
- Commitment (Top Management) – for Continuous Improvement.
- Vision – for Change.
- Management – Structure.
- Focus – Human Resource; Customer-Orientation; Environment; and Innovation.

LIMITATIONS AND FUTURE RESEARCH

As with many research studies, there is a risk additional relevant literature has not been considered or included in this review. Thus, this literature survey is only limited to the included research work used in this study. During the literature review, empirical studies dealing with different issues of SERVQUAL appear to be lagging behind, as most of them examined were not empirical in nature.

More conceptual, case studies, and empirical research is needed to clarify and validate relationships among theoretical constructs, which can be integrated into practical managerial frameworks. Overall, from an implementation perspective, service industries are in need of systematic and dynamic performance management approach. Such approaches should be able to measure, monitor, track, and continuously improve the different aspects of organisational performance.

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