Chapter 25

Service Quality: Status and Research Directions

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ABSTRACT

Once a service is defined, its quality must also be defined. Many service quality measures from marketing, supply chain, and Information Systems have been formulated and tested over the last 50 years, developing generic user satisfaction measures. This research reviews the research from the three disciplines, developing directions for future research on service quality. Suggested future research directions include a more context-specific, medium-sensitized approach to services, that is able to measure not only human services but also co-produced and machine-produced services.

INTRODUCTION

The word ‘service’ has hundreds of definitions that each differ in one or two words that alter the implications significantly (c.f., Berry, 1980; Parasuraman, et al., 1985; Vargo and Lusch, 2009). For instance, Vargo and Lusch (2009) settle on the customer ‘experience’ aspect of service as critical to differentiating a service from a non-service. Berry defines services an intangible and consumed (Berry, 1980), while Parasuraman, et al., (1985) define services as intangible, heterogeneity, and simultaneously produced and consumed. From these early definitions, services have undergone many definitional iterations. From information systems research, services provide value to customers (Conger, 2010). Combining these definitions, in this research, a service is an organizational capability for providing value to customers in the form of an experience (Berry, 1980; Conger, 2010; Vargo and Lusch, 2009). Service value may relate to a product, such as health care delivery, or from the meeting of some user need, such as solving a problem through a help desk.

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Similarly, the words ‘service quality’ also have hundreds of definitions that are irreconcilable. Service quality is a broadly researched area with more than 100,000 research articles found on library databases. Three major strains of research on service quality originate from marketing, supply chain, and information systems. Each discipline defines ‘service quality’ slightly differently and the definitions change over time. In general, the focus of service quality definitions is on perceptions, delivery time, or web technology, depending on the discipline. The extent to which there is a cumulative tradition in this research is limited and, therefore, as derivatives of original scales proliferate, the research becomes of increasingly limited value. The purpose of this paper is to explore the three major disciplines of service quality research to develop common themes and areas for new research, then to develop a research agenda for future work. This work is important as services understanding is evident in social networking, transaction and other types of service activities that organizations deliver through the Internet. Thus, since elements of the three disciplines are evident in Internet service delivery contexts, it is important for research to include the elements of relevance from each discipline in research.

As a broadly researched concept, this research necessarily takes a partial view of service quality, attempting to summarize the major strains of service quality research to develop a conceptual map of approaches. However, many quality research papers are omitted to avoid over-emphasis on details of discussions about a particular approach to service quality research. Over 300 research papers were evaluated for this research and this is only a small percent of the more than 100,000 found; the research used was selected as representative and exemplifies remaining research.

Major academic research databases accessed during this research include BI/Proquest, Academic Source Complete, ACM, Business Source Complete, Computer Source, EBSCO-Texshare, Google Scholar, JSTOR, and Psycinfo. Consumer satisfaction has been a topic of academic research for over 70 years. User satisfaction and its link to service quality have over 380,000 hits on Google Scholar (Google, 2011). Satisfaction is important to business in that it leads to continued business and positive word of mouth (Olshavsky and Miller, 1972; Cronin, et al., 2000; Trusov, et al., 2009). The articles selected for this research represent the major theories and models relating to service quality research. Thus, while this research paper describes the major theories and models for service quality measurement, many fine research papers may have been omitted.

THREE STRAINS OF SERVICE QUALITY RESEARCH

In this section, the three major areas of academic focus on service quality are reviewed. The areas – marketing, supply chain, and information systems – each take different, unique views of services and service quality, thus providing aspects for consideration in seeking to move research in this area forward. These areas identify the focus of the research but not necessarily of the researchers, who can be from any discipline. In general, the majority of the researchers are affiliated with the discipline in which the research is located; others are identified. First, each focal area’s research is summarized. Then, the discussion section summarizes criticisms, shortcomings, and areas for improvement for each focal area, describing key concepts to be incorporated into an integrated view of service quality.

Marketing Service Quality Research

Three main models and scales of service quality are developed in marketing research for SERVQUAL, SERVPERF, and eSQL (E-SERVQUAL). Each is discussed in this section.