Developing Servqual Elements for Customer Service Quality Satisfaction in Health Care Sector

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ABSTRACT

Quality is the keyword for survival of organizations in the global economy. In today's competitive environment delivering high quality service is the key for a sustainable competitive advantage. Service quality and customer satisfaction are very important concepts that companies must understand if they want to remain competitive and grow. Service quality is an approach to manage business processes in order to ensure full satisfaction of the customers which will help to increase competitiveness and effectiveness of the industry. Quality in service is very important especially for the growth and development of service sector business enterprises. It works as an antecedent of customer satisfaction. Satisfied customers form the foundation of any successful business as customer satisfaction leads to repeat purchase, brand loyalty, and positive word of mouth.

Health care service firms like other organizations are realizing the significance of customer-centered philosophies and are turning to quality management approaches to help managing their businesses. This paper elaborates the concept of SERVQUAL as an effective approach to measure the quality of provided services and also analyses the gaps between customer expectations and perceptions of the service organization in context of Hospitals. The paper highlights how management of service improvement can become more logical and integrated with respect to the prioritized service quality dimensions and their affections on increasing or decreasing service quality gaps. This paper also narrates the health care service quality dimensions & parameters and develops model for service quality (SERVQUAL) implementation in health care sector.

Keywords: Service, Quality, Gaps, SERVQUAL, Customer, Expectations, Perceptions

INTRODUCTION

Changing customer demands, increased expectations for superior quality of products or services and the global competition has created a competitive environment among different industrial sectors. Quality has become an icon for customers while selecting a service or product and at the same time organizations are making efforts for providing quality products or services as per customers' needs and wants. Quality has been considered as a strategic advantage for the organizations to gain success and to sustain in the business world.

Today the health care sector strains the nation's financial resources it has come under increased pressure to provide evidence of quality controls and quality improvements. Increasing evidence that the service aspects of health care are closely linked to health care outcomes has caught the attention of sector leaders. The current health care sector consumer is better educated and the best informed it has ever been. Health care organizations

must address those aspects of service that consumers most readily appreciate: access to care; relationships between physicians, meaningful and understandable information; and participation in their own health care and treatment decision making processes. One aspect of health care quality that is being increasingly recognized for its importance is the influence of patient perception. Even though the patient's perception of quality relies more on the service aspects of health care, it correlates well with objective measures of health care quality.

A health care organization's ability to satisfy consumer demand for convenience and information can significantly influence the quality of health care it ultimately delivers. The health care service sector is complex with multiple facets and levels of organization. Health care system management has previously been relatively inefficient, incoherent and supply driven, keeping customers on the outside of the product design, development and the delivery process. Today there is a shift to an organization model in which the customer influences every function and managers must adapt and be instrumental in establishing a cultural change within the system to meet the new quality focus.

Like the other service organizations; healthcare sector has also become a highly competitive and rapidly growing service industry around the world. The biggest challenge faced by healthcare markets is to define and measure the service quality. SERVQUAL' is a comprehensive scale to empirically estimate the level of quality services delivered to customers, and it is best suitable in the hospital environment (Babkus & Mangold, 1992).

SERVICE QUALITY (SERVQUAL)

Service quality is conceptualized as the consumer's perception about the level of services either it is of high quality or low quality (Zeithaml et al., 1990). Generally, service quality is assumed to be the difference between customer expectations and perceptions either it is received or being received by the customer (Grönroos, 2001; Parasuraman et al, 1988).service quality can be viewed as:

- In the words of Parasuraman et al., 1985, 1988, it is the difference between customer expectations and perceptions; expectation means service provider performance during deliverance of services whereas perception is measurement of delivery by the service provider (Parasuraman et al., 1985, 1988).
- According to Asubonteng et al. (1996), Service quality can be defined as "the difference between customers' expectations for service performance prior to the service encounter and their perceptions of the service received".
- According to Gefan (2002), it is a comparison made by the customers between the quality of services they want to receive and what they actually received from the service provider.

Hence, service quality is the judgment and consequences of consumers after making comparison of expectation with the perception of actual services delivered to them by the service organization (Gronoors, 1984; Berry et al. 1985, 1988) and any lacking between them is represented as a gap.

SERVICE QUALITY (SERVQUAL) MODEL

Today, service quality has become a major area of interest of practitioners, managers and researchers because of its impact on customer satisfaction, customer loyalty, and of course company profitability. The SERVQUAL conceptual model serves as a concise framework for understanding, measuring and improving service quality (Parasuraman et. al.1988). Service quality models provide companies with models on how to gather information on market demands in order to become more competitive in its operation in the market. Models not only help in learning the factors that play an important role to customer satisfaction but also provide directions for improvement. It is a simplified description of the actual situations. The conceptual models in service quality provide managers to identify problems with quality service and help them improving the efficiency, profitability and overall performance (Seith et al. 2006).

Zeithaml, and Berry identified 10 determinants of service quality In 1988, they developed the 10 determinants into five specific components: tangibles, reliability, responsiveness, assurance, and empathy. As, such, it provides a basic skeleton through its expectations/ perceptions format encompassing statements for each of the five service quality dimensions.

1. Reliability: The ability to provide the promised service dependably and accurately. Reliability is the customer expectation that the service is accomplished on time every time, in the same manner, and without errors.

2. Responsiveness: The willingness to help customers and provide prompt service. Keeping customers waiting, particularly for no apparent reason, creates negative perceptions of quality. In the event of a service failure, the ability to recover quickly with professionalism can create very positive perceptions of quality.

3. Assurance: The knowledge and courtesy of employees and their ability to inspire trust and confidence. The assurance dimension includes;
- Competence to perform the service,
- Politeness and respect for the customer, and
- Effective communication with the customer.

4. Empathy: The provision of caring, individualized attention the organization provides its customers. Empathy includes:
- Access (physical and social) - approachability and ease of contact
- Communication - keeping customers informed in a language they understand and really listening to them
- Understanding the customer - making the effort to get to know customers and their specific needs

5. Tangibility: The appearance of physical facilities, equipment, personnel and information material.
The SERVQUAL instrument has been productively used for measuring service quality in many service organizations, for example, service quality in hospitals, banking, telecommunications, insurance companies, etc.

SERVICE QUALITY GAPS
The gaps model of service quality was first developed by Parasuraman, Zeithaml & Berry, at Texas A&M and North Carolina Universities, in 1985. Based on exploratory studies of service such as executive interviews and focus groups in four different service businesses Parasuraman, Zeithaml & Berry proposed a conceptual model of service quality indicating that consumers' perception toward a service quality depends on the four gaps existing in organization – consumer environments. They further developed in-depth measurement scales for service quality in a later year (Parasuraman, Zeithaml, Berry, 1988). (Fig 1).
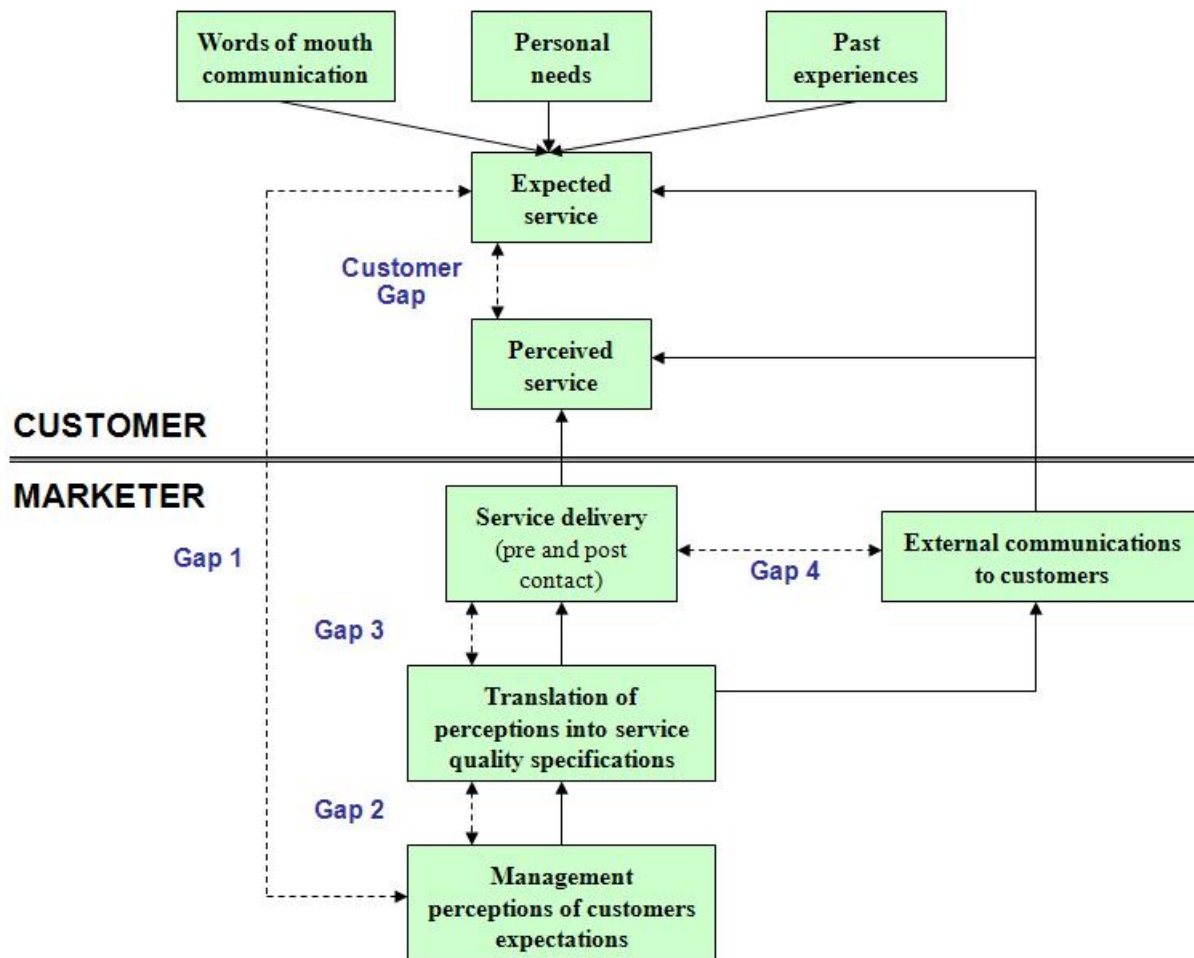
Fig. 1: Model of service quality gaps

Perceived service quality can be defined as, according to the model, the difference between consumers' expectation and perceptions which eventually depends on the size and the direction of the four gaps concerning the delivery of service quality on the company's side (Fig. 1; Parasuraman, Zeithaml, Berry, 1985).

Customer Gap = f (Gap 1, Gap 2, Gap 3, Gap 4)

➢ **Gap1: Customers' expectations versus management perceptions:** This gap arises because of not knowing what customers expect, as a result of the lack of a marketing research orientation, inadequate upward communication and too many layers of management.

➢ **Gap2: Management perceptions versus service specifications:** This gap arises because of selection of the wrong service quality standards, as a result of inadequate commitment to service quality, a perception of unfeasibility, inadequate task standardisation and an absence of goal setting.

➢ **Gap3: Service specifications versus service delivery:** This gap arises because of the service performance gap, as a result of role ambiguity and conflict, poor employee-job fit and poor technology-job fit, inappropriate supervisory control systems, lack of perceived control and lack of teamwork.

➢ **Gap4: Service delivery versus external communication:** This gap arises when promises made do not match actual delivery, as a result of inadequate horizontal communications and propensity to over-promise.

➢ **Gap5: The discrepancy between customer expectations and their perceptions of the service delivered:** as a result of the influences exerted from the customer side and the shortfalls (gaps) on the part

of the service provider. In this case, customer expectations are influenced by the extent of personal needs, word of mouth recommendation and past service experiences.

The magnitude and the direction of each gap will affect the service quality. For instance, Gap 3 will be favorable if the delivery of a service exceeds the standards of service required by the organization, and it will be unfavorable when the specifications of the service delivered are not met.

Applications of the Gaps Model

The model clearly determines the two different types of gaps in service marketing, namely the customer gap and the provider gaps. The latter is considered as internal gaps within a service firm. This model really views the services as a structured, integrated model which connects external customers to internal services between the different functions in a service organization. Important applications of the model are as follows:

- The gaps model of service quality gives insights and propositions regarding customers' perceptions of service quality.
- Customers always use 10 dimensions to form the expectation and perceptions of service quality.
- The model helps predict, generate and identify key factors that cause the gap to be unfavourable to the service firm in meeting customer expectations.

The model provides a conceptual framework for academic and business researchers to study the service quality in marketing.

SERVICE QUALITY (SERVQUAL) IN HEALTH CARE SECTOR

In healthcare organizations, service quality and patients satisfaction is getting considerable attentions and this issue is considered in their strategic planning process.

Andaleeb (2008) studied patient satisfaction (measured by using factor analysis). This study was conducted on caregivers who had accompanied a child came to a hospital in Dhaka. A regression model was constructed by using factor analysis based upon the five dimensional SERVQUAL model. The model explained 67.4% of the variation in the patients' satisfaction which was taken as the dependent variable. The behavior of the nurses, the behavior of the doctors and facilitation payments (staff expectation of extra payment for normal services that were provided to the patients) had been appeared as statistically significant determinants of patients' satisfaction. Tangibles composite (all the items that were related to the cleanliness of the hospital and staff) and input adequacy (availability of medicines and equipment whenever needed), appeared as statistically insignificant.

According to **Donabedian, 1980; Williams and Calnan, 1991**, Patients' perceptions about the services provided by a particular health care organizations also affects the image and profitability of the hospital and it also significantly affects the patient behavior in terms of their loyalty and word-of-mouth (Andaleeb, 2001).

Ross et al. (1987) concluded that patient (dis)satisfaction is the result of an interaction between expectations and perceived performance of service. If the patient has a positive expectation and it is substantially disconfirmed by perception of poor service performance, then the patient will be dissatisfied. The opposite is also true.

Miranda et.al. (2010) based their study on the SERVQUAL model and measured the gap between the perceptions of health managers and that of patients'. Patients' satisfaction was taken as the dependent variable and the variables, Health staff (doctors and nurses), Efficiency (waiting times and the time it takes to resolve complaints), No Health Staff (administrative staff), and Facilities (cleanliness, equipment and the location of the health center) were taken as independent variables. The gap between the perceptions of health managers and patients were measured and most of them were found to have statistically significant negative values.

Pakdil & Harwood, 2005 stated that increased patients expectations about the service quality had realized the healthcare service providers, to identify the key determinants that are necessary to improve healthcare services that causes patients satisfaction and it also helps the service providers to reduce time and money involved in handling patient's complaints.

Mostafa (2005) tested perceptions of service quality in Egypt from the perspective of public and private hospital patients and attempted to seek an answer to the question; how do patients evaluate service quality by using relevant dimension. The results of the survey highlighted a three factor solution of the SERVQUAL model. A statistically significant difference in terms of service quality was observed between public and private hospitals.

Carson et al. (1998) have stated that some professionals contend that consumers' perception of quality service in health care is distorted due to the inability of patients to judge the technical competence of the medical practitioner with any accuracy.

Lim and Tang (2000) examined patients' expectations and perceptions about hospital service quality in Singapore. In this study assurance and responsiveness appeared to be the most important dimensions of hospital services.

MODEL FOR SERVICE QUALITY (SERVQUAL) IMPLEMENTATION IN HEALTH CARE SECTOR

Quality management has become an important issue in hospitals in the last decade. The health-care market itself is changing from a seller-oriented to a buyer oriented market. As a consequence, the patient is becoming a customer. Much interest was paid by hospital management to professional quality. In addition, technological developments, rising technological as well as quality standards have had an important impact on medical care, surgical techniques, drugs, equipment and the organization and delivery of health care. Finally, assessing and satisfying the needs of the population in a buyer's market changed health-care market, has become prevalent. Managers of hospitals start to think in terms of care systems, with an increasingly important role for customers or patients.

The SERVQUAL instrument developed by Parasuraman et al. (1985) comprised of 22-items representing five dimensions had been widely used in health care to measure the service quality and in health care literature 'SERVQUAL' is considered as most reliable and valid measurement of perceived service quality (Reidenbach & Sandifer Smallwood, 1990; Babakus& Mangold, 1992; Vandamme& Leunis, 1993; Scardina, 1994; Taylor & Cronin, 1994; Lam, 1997; Wong, 2002; Kilbourne et al., 2004). The Healthcare sector must answer these following questions with positive answer of most of these questions which will indicate high level of service quality and if otherwise takes place then the management of hospital must try to make these factors positive for gaining high degree of service quality and subsequently high level of customer satisfaction.

Factor 1 : Tangibility :
1. The hospital has up to date equipment & technology.
2. The hospital's physical facilities are visually appealing.
3. Availability of Lab and pharmacy facilities within the hospital
4. The hospital has up-to-date care facilities (e.g. medical equipments, laboratories, medical examination room etc.).
5. The hospital's Bathrooms are very clean.
6. The hospital's Rooms are clean
7. The hospital's Rooms are quiet.
8. Hygienic conditions at hospital are good

9. The hospital has Healthy environment
10. The waiting area for medical examination, medical examination room, waiting area for payment, and toilets are clean.
11. The procedure of the lab test (e.g. blood checking and urine checking) at the hospital is convenient.
12. The lab test's results are done in a prompt and accurate way.
13. It is easy to use the amenities (e.g. cafeteria, public telephone etc.) in this hospital.
14. Doctors and staff are neat in appearance
15. Doctors and staff are professional and competent
16. Doctors possess wide spectrum of knowledge
17. The hospital has System of error free and fast retrieval of documents
18. The hospital's location is accessible
19. The hospital's Meals are attractive.
20. The hospital's Food has right temperature.
21. The hospital's Nurses respect privacy.
22. The hospital's Parking is convenient.

Factor 2: Assurance:
23. Doctor's expertise and skills
24. Thorough investigations of the patient
25. Doctors almost make right diagnoses
26. Doctors go for expert opinion in critical cases
27. Accuracy in Hospital's lab reports
28. Doctors and staff are courteous and friendly
29. Hospital give Special attention to emergency patients
30. Food is delivered by a certain time.
31. Staff of hospital promises to do something by a certain time,
32. They should keep patients' records accurately.
33. Hospital charges are accurate
34. Doctors possess wide spectrum of knowledge
35. Patients are treated with dignity and respect
36. Patients are explained their medical condition thoroughly
37. It is easy to find way to care facilities (e.g. laboratories, medical examination room etc.) and amenities (e.g. cafeteria, public telephone etc.).

Factor 3: Responsiveness:
38. Doctors/staff efficiently respond to the patients
39. Doctors/Staff are willing to help/facilitate the patients
40. The hospital staff tells their customer (patient & patient family) exactly when services will be performed.
41. . The doctor adequately explains patient's condition, examination results, and treatment process.
42. The doctor allows patient & their care takers to ask many questions, enough to clarify everything.
43. The doctors pay enough consideration to patient & their care takers' concerns for deciding medical procedure.
44. Nursing staffs thoroughly explains the medication process to patient & their care takers.
45. Nursing staff tries to help patients as much as they can.
46. Nursing staffs sincerely cared for me.
47. Patients who will be discharged get prompt service from employees of the hospital for the discharging operations.

48. Hospital provides prompt services to Patients from nurses when the patient needs to them.
49. Hospital provides prompt service from employees of the hospital to Patients who come to hospital for the admission operation.
50. Employees of the hospital are willing to help their patients.
51. Employee of the hospital address customers' questions appropriately about the discharging process.
52. Employee of the hospital address customers' questions appropriately about any procedure.
53. The doctor at the hospital explains the treatment to the patient very clearly.
54. The doctor at the hospital explains discharge of the patient to the patients' family.

Factor 4: Reliability:
55. Patients feel safe that hospital nurses are knowledgeable.
56. Patients and their caretakers trust nurses of the hospital.
57. Patients are positive that they will recover well before they are discharged.
58. Patient trust billing as well as system of billing of the hospital.
59. Patients feel safe in their transactions with hospital's employees.

Factor 5: Empathy:
60. Doctors at the hospital have genuine concern about patients
61. Doctor at the hospital care their patients
62. Hospital's staff and nurses care the patient
63. Hospital put their best efforts to provide comfort to patients
64. Doctors and staff understand the specific needs of patients and give them their personal attention.
65. Doctors and staff have patients ' interests at heart
66. Feedback is obtained from patients admitted in the hospital
67. Services at the hospital are available round the clock

Factor 6: Courtesy:
68. Doctors at the hospital are polite.
69. Hospital staffs (e.g. nursing staffs, pharmacist, receptionist, and cashier excluding doctors) are friendly and polite during admissions procedure as well as during housekeeping process. .
70. Nurses' behaviour at the hospital is very polite to patient as well as their care takers.
71. Nurses at the hospital are cheerful.
72. Visitors at the hospital are treated well.

Factor 7: Timeliness:
73. Patients are observed according to appointment
74. The payment procedure was quick and simple.
75. In time delivery of reports/services to the patients
76. Doctors/Staff observe the promised time in hospital

EPILOGUE
Customer service in health care is different than in other industries because the customers are recipients of medical services that are critical to their health. A sense of urgency penetrates the medical field's customer service structure, as patients are attempting to navigate their way around the health care system. One thing that health care organizations should consider is that patients can shop around for their medical services. If a patient has a negative customer service experience at a hospital, it is possible for that patient to take his business elsewhere.

In today's health care industry, patients are demanding more transparency when it comes to their medical services, as well as easier and more efficient ways to manage their bills and assistance with accessing medical resources. In response to the influx of technological advancements taking place in the health care field, more and more organizations are finding ways to streamline information and create systems that can benefit patients, such as patient information management systems. This, in turn, can improve customer service in the health care field. Today, health care organizations are working hard and innovative about how they can maintain good customer service relations with their consumers.

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