Conceptual Evolution of Service Quality – A Primer

SRI HARISH D. N	DR. K. NAGENDRA BABU
Research Scholar, DoS in Commerce, University of Mysore, Mysuru-570005	Associate Professor, DoS in Commerce, University of Mysore, Mysuru-570005

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 pre-requisite 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. This paper discusses the principal literature relating to the evolution of service quality.*

Genesis:

Service 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 produced goods. Pioneer research in this area (George and Barksdale, 1974) identified several distinct differences between the marketing of *service* firms and *manufacturing* firms. Their research 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 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 service 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.

Chronology of Service Quality Research:

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-1 describes the general chronology of service quality research encompassing the list of eminent researchers and the research issues they raised over the time.

"Table-1 About Here"

Table-1: Chronology of Service Quality Research

Year	Researchers	Research Issue
1976	Anderson, et al	Recognised importance of selection as priority for obtaining and retaining customers
1982	Churchill and 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 and 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 and 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	Parasura-man, 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	Parasura-man, 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
1989	Babakus and Mangold	Developed serious reservations about SERVQUAL's scales: reliability and discriminant validity
1990	Bitner	Noted research yielded service quality as being similar to attitude
1992	Cronin and 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
1994	Parasura-man, 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, Jr. and Taylor	Found fault with SERVQUAL and developed SERVPERF based upon consumer satisfaction exerts stronger influence on purchase intentions that does service quality
1994	Taylor and Baker	All used multi-item measures to ascertain overall service quality with factors as antecedents
1996	Dabholkar, et al.	
1996	Spreng and Mackoy	
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 and 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 and 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

Churchill and 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.

A year after this significant research, Lewis and 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 and 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.

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