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Research Paper

Identification Of Service Gaps In Bsnl,Madurai -A Step Towards Improving Service Quality.

Management

KEYWORDS :Service quality, gap analysis, telecommunication

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ABSTRACT

Telecommunication services is facing heavy competition with the liberalization policy of the government and the entry of private players.The teledensity is increasing at a very fast pace.New players want to increase their market share while the already existing service provider BSNL, wants to retain its market share as well as increase upon it. With the customer having the choice to opt for more than one service provider with similar services, prices and heavy marketing it is the service quality which the customer is concerned about.Customer loyalty is dependent on customer satisfaction which in turn is dependent on service quality. The service quality gap model proposes five gaps in any service organization. This paper studies the gaps involved in an organization in a service sector with special reference to Bharat Sanchar Nigam Limited,Madurai.The perceived service and the expected service depends on individuals but the factors which influence them can be managed to reduce the expectation perception gap of the customer. The customer's experience with the service is what determines their perception of service quality and this experience can be made memorable by working on the other four gaps to reduce the service quality gap to minimum. This paper identifies the gaps in the context of BSNL,Madurai and provides suggestions to narrow down this gap. The reduction of all the gaps will itself enhance the customer's experience and hence the service quality perception of the customer.

1.Introduction:

Managing service quality has become an important aspect of organizations in the face of increasing competition and customer awareness. Customer expects good quality in any service or product. It becomes very complicated when it comes to services because of their unique characteristics such as being heterogeneous, intangible inseparable from the production process, and perishable. But in the competitive scenario where a number of organizations are providing similar services at almost similar tariff the differentiating factor for the customer is only service quality. Service quality for the customer is the entire service experience which he encounters with the organization personnel and its service. A customer is satisfied with the service if he perceives it to be of good quality and is delighted if it exceeds their expectation.

Every service organization which wants to capture new market share or retain its existing customer base has to ensure that its customer are satisfied. Hence it becomes essential to evaluate or measure and monitor customer satisfaction which in turn is dependent on the customer's perception of service quality. This study carries out gap analysis in Bharat Sanchar Nigam Limited(BSNL)-one of the largest telecommunication service provider in the country with special reference to Madurai region for improvement of service quality and provides suggestions for managing the different service quality gaps in the organization. With the competition in the telecom sector heating up,and customers ready to explore more than one service provider it is essential for BSNL to carry out a gap analysis and work on its weaknesses to remain in the reckoning.

2.Literarature review:

Understanding the services requires a different logic than understanding physical goods. Important reasons for this are the fact that the consumption of services can be characterized as process consumption, whereas the consumption of physical goods can be understood as outcome consumption, as well as the observation that services are processes, not preproduced products. Grönroos (1998)

Grönroos (2006) defines service as 'a process consisting of a series of more or less intangible activities, that normally, but not necessarily, take place in interactions between the customer and service employees and/or physical resources or goods and/or systems of the service provider, which are provided as solutions to customer problems.' Besides the core solution an enhanced offering consisting of physical product components, service components, information, personal attention and other elements of customer relationships has been suggested as constituting a service, as service has been viewed as solutions, outcomes, benefits or value for the customer.

Service quality is an essential strategy for winning and retaining customers (Zeithaml,2000). Service quality has been defined as the extent to which a service meets customers' needs or expectations (Lewis and Mitchell, 1990)

If expectations are greater than performance, then perceived quality is less than satisfactory and hence customer dissatisfaction occurs (Parasuraman et al ., 1985) .

Service quality(SQ) has been defined as the expectation perception gap of the customer by Parasuraman,Zeithaml and Berry,1985 and Servqual has been suggested as a tool to measure this gap.In their 1985 work they have identified ten components of SQ-reliability, responsiveness, competence, access, courtesy, communication, credibility, security, understanding the customer and tangibles.These components were collapsed into five components-reliability,assurance, tangibility, empathy and responsiveness in their 1988 work. Goonroos(1984) identified three components of SQ -technical,functional and reputational quality.

3.Objectives:

- To identify the service quality gaps in BSNL, Madurai.
- To provide suggestions to reduce the gaps and improve service quality.

4.1 Service quality gap model :

In the gap model proposed by Parasuraman et al they have identified five gaps between an executives perception of SQ and the tasks associated with service delivery which have to be minimized to deliver any service to the customer to be perceived as a high quality service.Four gaps are the gaps involved in the service delivery process while the fifth gap is the actual service quality gap as perceived by the customer.

The gap model proposed by them is shown below.

Gap1:Difference between what the customer expects and what the management perceives as customer's perception

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Gap2:Difference between the management's perception of the customer's expectation and it's translation into service quality specification

Gap3:The difference between the specifications of service quality and the actual service delivered to the customer

Gap4:The difference between the service delivered to the customer and the promise of the firm about its service quality to its customers

Gap5:The difference between the customer's expectation and perception of the service.

The authors have identified gap5 as the service quality gap that leads to customer dissatisfaction .

When service delivered exceeds customer expectation it results in customer delight whereas when service delivered falls below the expectation it leads to customer dissatisfaction.Hence every organization should try to reduce gap 5 to improve the service quality and in turn the customer's experience.

Reduction in gap 5 can be brought about by increasing their perception of the service to bring it closer to their expectation or by reducing the customer's expectation to bring it closer to their perception .

4.2 Managing service quality:
As discussed earlier all the four gaps gap1,gap2,gap3 and gap4 are gaps which the marketer can monitor and control to minimize gap 5- the customer service quality gap.

4.2.1 Gap 1-Customer expectation-management perception gap
Management's perception is normally based on providing the best service from the delivery angle irrespective of what is being offered whereas the customer focus is on meeting their need/requirements.And each customer has varied requirements based on their experience,demographic profile,etcWhen resources are limited the management has to arrive at a decision which provides the maximum benefit to the maximum number of people.

- For example,in a telecom company it is observed that there is a lot of request for data services from a particular pocket.The management perceives that the customers are in very much need of data services and installs wi-max BTS in the area. But the number of customers taking new connection on installation is very less compared to the equipment and labour cost involved. The customers who had requested earlier were not ready to avail the service as they had initially expected the service to be cheaper or they had shifted to some other alternative or provider either because of tariff/other acceptable alternative/the delay in procurement and installation by which time the need no longer existed.
- Another example in BSNL would be when some customers would like to avail wireline broadband service .Since this requires a physical copper pair to be laid right upto the customer premises and allotment of telephone number, etc the broadband has to be necessarily availed alongwith the landline connection even if the customer wants to use only broadband. The customer has the option to pay for landline plus broadband plan charges or opt for combo plans.But the customer ends up feeling he is being overcharged as he wants only broadband and additional landline connection is not required.

These types of gap can be reduced by the management by having exclusive teams for marketing research at the corporate level with smaller teams lower down in the hierarchy to work in tandem with the local heads heading smaller jurisdictions.These teams can carry out surveys or hold consumer meetings to judge the preference of the customers regarding the facilities/benefits or the mode of delivery/accessibility,etc to get a better understanding of their expectation so that discrepancies can be reduced to a minimum. Plans can be formulated to suit the customer's requirements rather than trying to accommodate the customer in the existing options available.

4.2.2 Gap 2-Management perception-service quality specification gap
The gap involved in the translation of management's perception into specification . The customers expect that faults should be set right as quickly as possible and new connections booked should be provided immediately. BSNL having the largest landline customer base in urban and rural areas, the task of ensuring a satisfied customer base is a daunting task.The management is aware of the customer needs but as man power and resources are limited and all customers are to be catered to at the earliest it becomes a difficult task .The specification therefore states that all line faults(peripheral end faults) are to be set right on the same day and cable faults to be set right within 3 days,new connections to be provided within seven days in feasible areas,etc The customer not only expects quicker service but tends to compare with the other service providers who are less into wireline and more into wireless. In case of lesser faults on any day the faults can be cleared immediately but when more number of faults occur there might be delay in attending to a particular fault.This gap may be difficult to avoid but routine maintenance and monitoring procedures can reduce the gap .Also, the effect of dissatisfaction can be reduced by keeping customers informed and aware of their service status as to the restoration time, provision time, etc

4.2.3 Gap 3-Service quality specification-service delivery gap
Once the organization has declared the service specification for the service ,the service delivered should not deviate from the SQ specification. All employees should be made aware and there should be no deviation from the specification if this gap is to be avoided. The time taken to deliver the service, the technical quality of the service solution, the human interactions ,the tangibles provided, etc all form a part of the service delivery process.

- For example, if the specification says that a cable fault will be restored in three days, the customer support staff on enquiry would inform the customer that it would be set right shortly or maximum within a period of three days. In case the field staff do not ensure its restoration in time it leads to customer dissatisfaction.
- The service delivery gap in some cases is due to unavoidable circumstances. For example, when there is a major breakdown of cables such as during instances of road widening, water pipe laying, etc by the local gov-

erning bodiesor there is a powerplant failure, equipment failure, etc the priority is shifted as network restoration/exchange restoration takes precedence over routine fault maintenance. There would be a service delivery gap but the customer support team should be responsive to the customer enquiries to reduce the effect.

- Sometimes this gap arises on account of the customer.For example, in the case of broadband complaints , a fault on the provider's side such as modem fault,splitter fault,port fault,etc are set right immediately. Sometimes a fault in the customer PC can be a cause for broadband complaint such as a change in the settings, virus attack, changeover to a new PC, etc .However, the customer treats it as a service delivery gap although the provider is responsible only for providing the pipeline and ensuring its bandwidth. Sometimes the customers book the complaint but are unavailable at their premises where the connection is located especially if both the spouses are working employees.

This gap can be avoided usually by proper supervision and monitoring and making every employee aware of the organization's specifications except under certain unavoidable circumstances as mentioned above. Regular training of personnel both the front end and backend staff and increasing customer awareness regarding the services can help in narrowing down this gap.

4.2.4 Gap 4-Service delivery-external communication gap

The service delivery process should ensure that the service delivered is as per the technical specifications of the service.Providing a telephone connection on time but without proper speech clarity or a broadband connection with lesser bandwidth than the plan booked will result in poor perception of the service delivered. Simultaneously, the external communication should also be appropriate and bring out the features of the service without any exaggeration.

It is quite common to see advertisements calling out to book and avail connections immediately or avail offers for limited periods.The advertisement has to be crisp while simultaneously being attractive.Hence, it becomes difficult to communicate all the details in advertisements.

For example,the advertisement for BSNL broadband says to get a broadband connection immediately, book broadband unlimited plans connection either through SMS or by ringing up a certain contact number. What it does not mention is that connections can be provided only in feasible areas immediately. If a customer residing in a non-feasible area books the connection the connection cannot be provided immediately but is delayed by the time taken to lay cables, increase the broadband ports, etc.The customers from such areas are dissatisfied with the delay in the service delivery although the advertisement says avail the service immediaitely. The external communication through media campaigns,hoardings,public events,etc should not exaggerate more than what can be delivered by the organization. While an edge over the competitor's advertisement/ communication is essential it should be based only on true achievable facts without risking the company's credibility. Thus, by ensuring that the external communication is congruent with the service delivered this gap can be narrowed down to a minimum.

When the SQ specification is communicated only partially or there is discrepancy in interpretation it gives scope for the customer to misinterpret /arrive at a different conclusion. This could be when certain additional facilities or freebees/discounts are offered with only certain services or there are limited offers only or it is being offered to loyal customers only,etc but the advertisement does not specifically state so. The customer is made aware of it only after he approaches the service provider.

Hence, every organization should ensure that what is communicated is what is being delivered and what is being offered is what is being communicated.

4.2.5 Gap 5- The expected – perceived service gap

The customer is influenced by word of mouth,personal need , past experiences and the external media which gives rise to some expectation regarding the service.The service providers personnel, service delivery process and the actual service which is delivered all contribute towards the customer's perception of the service.If there is a gap between this service expectation and perception of the services it leads to dissatisfaction.This gap between the expected service and perceived service is referred to as the service quality gap.

The service quality as perceived by the customer depends on the size and direction of Gap5 which in turn is dependent on the other four gaps-Gap1,Gap2,Gap3 and Gap4 which are the gaps from the provider's side.Narrowing down all other gaps can reduce gap5 to a minimum and ensure customer satisfaction as the customer will perceive a service which is closer to his/her expectation. Some of the suggestions by which these gaps can be reduced are as follows.

- Getting the customer's expectation right
- Preparing the service quality specification keeping the end user in mind within the available resources without compromising the organisation's credibility.
- Fixing achievable norms for the service delivery process and streamlining the process for maximum efficiency.
- Ensuring that the external communication is accurate and trustworthy as otherwise dissatisfaction amongst large number of customers can affect the organization's reputation
- With the technological changes taking place at a very fast pace in the communication sector and the customer having multiple options to choose from, the service provider has to take on the additional responsibility of guiding the customer to choose a service to meet the customer's expectation by understanding the need behind his/her requirements.

For example,a customer wanting to download large volumes of journals or videos should be guided to opt for an unlimited broadband plan as against a limited broadband plan as the billing can be very high if the customer opts for a limited plan and the free usage limit is exceeded. In fact this has been the cause for many broadband customers becoming defaulters. BSNL had introduced a special scheme called "Samadhan scheme" for such defaulters whereby the bill amount could be reduced by calculating their usage under new special plans proposed in the scheme.This was a step towards reducing the customer expectation-perception gap and the customers were happy to pay less and BSNL was also able to retain the customer.

5. Suggestions to improve the service quality in provision of BSNL service:

- Trained and empowered manpower at the front end where customer interaction takes place so that service personnel can be more responsive.
- Trained personnel in the right proportion with technical know how for implementing and catering to the customers of enterprise data services such as MPLS-VPN,internet leased line, such as FTTH,Wi-max,etc
- Trained personnel in the right proportion with IT skills for implementing and catering to the customer requirements of IT related services such as web hosting, internet data centre, Business mail service(SaaS), etc

- Marketing survey to be carried out periodically to judge the customer's expectation in the face of competition.
- In case of failures or any breakdown keeping the customer's informed through media or through customer service centres.
- Crisp and accurate advertisements with no scope for misinterpretation.
- Treating every customer complaint as an opportunity to improve the system.
- Keeping all the personnel trained and aware of the company's service quality goals.
- Making the company's websites/portals more customer friendly without having to go through a maze of options.
- Educating customers about the grievance redressal mechanisms available.

6. Conclusion:

SQ is dependent on the customers perception of the overall service delivered .Customer's perception and expectation are variable but the expectation-perception gap can be narrowed down to a minimum by the service organizations by managing the other gaps which also contribute in building up the customer's perception and expectation of a service. The five gaps as per the service quality gap model have been identified and analysed with reference to BSNL,Madurai who is one of the telecom service provider in Madurai region .The service quality gap can be minimized by managing the management's perception gap,the specification translation gap,the service delivery gap and the media communication gap which involves reducing the discrepancies at every stage.After analyzing the gaps some suggestions for the improvement of service quality have also been summarized .

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