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## SERVICE QUALITY DIMENSIONS IN RETAIL SETTINGS: AN EMPIRICAL STUDY AT SELECTED APPAREL SPECIALTY STORES OF MUMBAI

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### ABSTRACT

*Retailing in India is poised for giant leap. Statistics is indicative of the tremendous potential it has in terms of bringing about socioeconomic transformation. Recent policy decision to permit 51% FDI in retail has given further boost to the champions of organized retailing in India. In spite of tremendous potential, the sector is bound to see unprecedented competition. And in the cut throat competitive scenario, only those who offer superior value in terms of quality will survive. The present paper uses SERVQUAL Model of Service Quality for analyzing the Service Quality Dimensions of Apparel Specialty Stores in the City of Mumbai. The findings are expected to be useful for the practitioner in the sector while taking sound marketing decisions.*

### KEYWORDS

Service Quality, SERVQUAL, Retail, Apparel Specialty Stores.

### INTRODUCTION AND RELEVANCE OF THE STUDY

While in India, retailing industry has made huge strides over the last 10 years. Traditionally, retail is India's largest industry, accounting for more than 10 percent of the country's GDP and around 8 percent of the employment, according to figures of the National Council for Applied Economic Research (NCAER, 2005).

Rated the fifth most attractive emerging retail market, India is being seen as a potential goldmine and has been ranked 2<sup>nd</sup> in a Global Retail Development Index of 30 developing countries.

Organized retailing is projected to grow at the rate of 25%-30% p.a. and is estimated to reach an astounding Rs. 1000 billion by 2010.

It is estimated that over next five years the investment requirement will be Rs.30 Billion per year. AT Kearney puts the figure at 8,00,000 Crores with annual growth of 20%.

Changing Consumer Behavior patterns is the sign of promising future for the retail sector in India.

To tackle the managerial challenges emerging out of retail revolution there is an acute need of new knowledge base so as to guide the decision making process for superior results.

The present study strives to contribute in this endeavor of knowledge creation in the domain of Indian Retail Management.

Building on the theories and models developed in the western world, the research presents the framework for decision makers in Indian Retail.

The theoretical Concepts and conceptual models on which the research is based are: Service Quality, Service Quality Dimensions, SERVQUAL, Customer Expectations and Perceptions, Patronage Behavior.

### CONCEPT OF QUALITY

In its broadest sense, quality is a degree of excellence: the extent to which something is fit for its purpose. In the narrow sense, product or service quality is defined as conformance with requirement, freedom from defects or contamination, or simply a degree of customer satisfaction.

In quality management literature, quality is defined as the totality of characteristics of a product or service that bears on its ability to satisfy stated and implied needs.

Crosby (1979, p. 151) defined quality of goods as "conformance to requirements"; Juran (1980, p. 132) defined it as "fitness for use"; while Garvin (1983) measured quality by counting the incidence of "internal" failures (those observed before a product left the factory) and "external" failures (those incurred in the field after a unit had been installed).

### QUALITY AS APPLIED TO SERVICES

Grönroos (1990a) has noted that product quality was traditionally linked to the technical specifications of goods, with most definitions of quality arising from the manufacturing sector where quality control has received extensive attention and research. The product-based definitions of quality may be appropriate to the goods-producing sector; however, according to Parasuraman and others, knowledge about the quality of goods is insufficient to understand service quality (Parasuraman *et al.*, 1985).

Hence while researching and managing service quality unique characteristics of the services are to be kept in mind.

### CHARACTERISTICS OF SERVICES

The four unique characteristics of services (differentiating them from tangible products) identified by the authors since 70's are:

1. Intangibility (Bateson, 1977);
2. Heterogeneity (Booms and Bitner, 1981);
3. Inseparability (Carman and Langeard, 1980); and
4. Perishability (Grönroos, 1990b).

The measurement and management of service quality is more challenging as compared to tangible products due to these characteristics.

### SERVICE QUALITY AND ITS DIMENSIONS

Nature and extent of Service Quality is dependent upon certain identifiable factors or dimensions which can be optimized with wise managerial judgments.

### EXPECTATIONS AND PERCEPTIONS

Grönroos (1984, p. 38) defined service quality as a perceived judgment, resulting from an evaluation process where customers compare their *expectations* with the service they *perceive* to have received. According to him service quality issues could be split into **technical quality** (*what is done*) and **functional quality** (*how it is done*).

Parasuraman *et al.* (1988, p. 17) defined service quality as "the degree of discrepancy between customers' *normative expectations* for the service and their *perceptions* of the service performance". Perceived service quality is then interpreted from the differences in degree and direction between perceptions and expectations, and this approach to service quality is adopted in this study. A good operational example of a standardised framework for understanding service quality is the SERVQUAL instrument developed by Parasuraman *et al.* (1988). These authors sought to determine common dimensions of service delivery beginning with focus group interviews of consumers. The researchers discovered ten general dimensions which they labeled:

1. Tangibles;
2. Reliability;

3. Responsiveness;
4. Competence;
5. Courtesy;
6. Credibility;
7. Security;
8. Access;
9. Communications; and
10. Understanding.

Further refinement resulted in the instrument composed of five higher-order dimensions which subsumed the previous ten. These five dimensions are

1. Tangibles,
2. Reliability,
3. Responsiveness,
4. Assurance, and
5. Empathy.

#### **SERVQUAL MODEL**

Evaluation of service quality involves a comparison of customers' expectations of the service before it occurs with their perceptions of the service after the encounter (Parasuraman *et al.*, 1985). Thus, the SERVQUAL scale is comprised two sets of matched items measuring *expectations* and *perceptions*.

Although Cronin and Taylor (1992) argue that measuring customer perceptions is sufficient, in this study we are follow Parasuraman *et al.*'s conceptualization as there is strong theoretical support (Parasuraman *et al.*, 1994).

Several studies subsequently employed SERVQUAL to measure service quality and to assess the validity and reliability of the scale across a wide range of industries and cultural contexts (Carman, 1990; Finn and Lamb, 1991; Gagliano and Hathcote, 1994; Blanchard and Galloway, 1994; Mittal and Lassar, 1996; Zhao, Bai and Hui, 2002; Witkowski and Wolfenbarger, 2002; Wong and Sohal, 2003). Little is known about the service quality perceptions in India (Jain and Gupta, 2004) because the focus of research has primarily been on the developed countries (Herbig and Genestre, 1996).

#### **SERVQUAL SCALE FOR SPECIFIC INDUSTRY**

Parasuraman *et al.* (1994) suggest that service quality is a multifaceted construct and no agreement exists as to the number of dimensions or their interrelationships.

Similarly, Bolton and Drew (1994) note that different service dimensions are relevant in different industries, hence the need to develop multiple scale items that adequately capture a particular study context.

Hence in order to accurately assess service quality in different industry settings, modifications of the SERVQUAL scale may be warranted (Carman, 1990; Dean, 1999).

#### **SERVICE CLASSIFICATIONS IN RETAIL INDUSTRY**

Gagliano, Hathcote (1994) translated the service quality divisions of technical and functional (Gronross; 1984) into 'Store service' and 'Sales service' for the apparel specialty stores, in order to customize the terms for the retailing sector. Conceptual definitions are:

- *Store service:*
  - In-store credit;
  - Returns/exchanges/adjustments;
  - Variety, quality, and dependability of service;
  - Price of after-sale service.
- *Sales service:*
  - Attitude, courteous, knowledgeable, helpful clerks;
  - Prompt attention, prompt processing of transactions;
  - Individual attention/service.

This classification facilitates compartmentalization of the tasks into two broad divisions. Store operation managers might be more involved with front-line employees in improving store service policies; whereas, personnel managers might work with the sales service aspects. Service strategies on both "store service" and "sales service" can be efficiently dealt with by the retailers.

#### **SERVICE: IT'S INFLUENCE ON PATRONAGE IN RETAIL SETTINGS**

While store image is an important factor influencing store patronage (Berry, 1969), the emergence of above average service as a specialty store strategy indicates the importance of service in determining store patronage (Gagliano, Hathcote; 1994). Specialty store shoppers judged store personnel (the major determinant of "Sales Service") as a more important determinant of patronage than the department store or discount store shopper (Lumpkin and McConkey, 1984). For example, men who patronized high fashion men's apparel specialty stores cited knowledgeable, helpful sales associates as the most important factor influencing store patronage (King and Ring, 1980). These findings provide insight about the importance of service as a criterion for patronage. While studies have shown that service is an important criterion for store patronage in specialty stores, there are also other important factors. Five of the most common factors summarized by Berman and Evans (1992) include: merchandise, price, service, location, and advertising.

#### **PURPOSE OF THE STUDY**

The primary purpose of this study was to ascertain information on customer expectations and their perceptions of service quality delivered at the apparel specialty stores and its influence on patronage. This knowledge in turn can be of managerial value in the context of decision making.

#### **OBJECTIVES OF THE STUDY**

The present study was undertaken with the following objectives

1. To ascertain consumer expectations and perceptions of service quality in apparel specialty stores
2. To understand the importance of Service Quality with respect to Stores Patronage behavior.

#### **METHODOLOGY**

##### **SAMPLE**

A random sample of 164 adult retail customers were selected from the city of Mumbai because it is among the first cities in India where large format retail stores were introduced and consequently has a greater degree of stability in consumer expectations as compared to other cities. The selection of the respondents from Mumbai city alone, avoids the bias of service perceptions that might vary by geographical location. All the selected respondents were apparel shoppers since large format apparel stores have been in existence for a longer period of time in India as compared to, say, large format grocery stores or hyper stores.

##### **SURVEY INSTRUMENTS AND TOOLS FOR DATA ANALYSIS**

The instrument used for the present study had two important sections. The first section included the questions to measure the service quality of the apparel store and was based on the SERVQUAL instrument developed by Parasuraman *et al.* (1991) and used by Gagliano, Hathcote (1994) for a similar type of

study conducted in Southeastern US. This section of the survey consisted of SERVQUAL "expectation" statements operationally defined as what customers would expect from an ideal specialty apparel store offering excellent quality service. Following the expectation ratings, the respondents had to name a specialty clothing store which they recently shopped. Then, based upon the store they indicated, respondents were required to rate their "perceptions" for the statements. This section included 22 items/statements. For each of the statements, respondents indicated on a scale from one (strongly disagree) to seven (strongly agree) the extent to which they believe the specialty store they shopped in had the features described (see Table I). factor analysis was used to analyze the data collected from this section.

The questions included in the second section of the instrument were pertaining to understand the importance of service quality as compared to the other factors the customers considered for store patronage, the method developed by Berman, Evans (1992) was used. The respondents allocated a total of 100 points among five retail strategies used to increase store patronage (Berman and Evans, 1992; *Gagliano*, Hathcote, 1994). The retail strategy considered for this purpose was Merchandise, Price, Service, Location and Advertising. The strategy which was considered to be the most important received the highest point as compared to others. This section of the questionnaire determined the importance of service with respect to other factors of store patronage (see Table III).

## DATA PRESENTATION, ANALYSES AND DISCUSSIONS

### SERVICE QUALITY DIMENSIONS

The items included in the first section of the instrument were analyzed using anticipated five factor principal axis factor analysis, followed by oblique rotation (Parsuraman et al 1991; *Gagliano*, Hathcote, 1994). However the loadings that emerged from the analysis were not exactly similar to the previous studies except *reliability* and *tangibles* therefore, new categorical names were developed to describe the factor groupings (see table ). The five factors that emerged were;

1. Personal Attention
2. Problem Solving
3. Reliability
4. Tangibles
5. Convenience

Six items clustered to form the personal attention dimension;

- o Prompt service
- o Customized service
- o Never too busy to respond
- o Polite and courteous salesperson
- o Individual attention
- o Enthusiasm and interest at heart
- o Sales person behavior instills confidence
- o Service delivered when promised

The items that formed the problem solving dimension were;

- o Interest in solving problems
- o Expected to deal with customer queries
- o Willingness to help customers
- o Knowledgeable salesperson

The items included in the above two dimensions viz., personal attention and problem solving represents a list of items having the characteristics of responsiveness, assurance and empathy. However, during the survey these items reflected the "sales service" component of service quality.

The reliability dimension included four items viz., dependable service, accurate billing, and trustworthy employees and secured feeling in transactions. These items represented how secured or safe a customer felt during his transactions with the store. The tangibles dimension comprised three items; visually appealing store appearance, neatly dressed salespersons and appealing promotional material. the tangible dimension usually acts as the crowd puller or has the first impression of the store on the minds of the customers. These characteristics help to build the image of the store.

The convenience dimension comprised three items: up to date equipments, convenient physical layout and convenient operating hours. The customers expect up to date equipments like scanner, easy payment/ credit card acceptance facility to make their shopping more fast and convenient.

TABLE 1: DIMENSIONS

Sl. No	Items	Personal Attention	Problem Solving	Reliability	Tangibles	Convenience
1	Modern/up to date Equipments (like Mirrors, dressing rooms, etc					0.53
2	Visually appealing store appearance				0.65	
3	Neatly dressed Sales Persons				0.55	
4	Convenient physical layout					0.58
5	Services delivered is Prompt	0.63				
6	Sales Persons should have interest in solving problems		0.66			
7	Dependable Service			0.67		
8	Accurate billing			0.61		
9	Sales persons are expected to deal with customers queries		0.71			
10	Customized service	0.65				
11	Sales person should be wiling to help the customers		0.69			
12	The Sales person should never be too busy to respond	0.82				
13	The Sales person should be trustworthy			0.72		
14	Customers should feel secure in transaction			0.74		
15	Sales person should be polite & Courteous	0.76				
16	Sales person should be Knowledgeable about the recent trends in apparel fashion		0.59			
17	Customers are to provided with individual attention	0.71				
18	Appealing promotional material				0.64	
19	Sales person should have enthusiasm and interest at heart	0.58				
20	They should have convenient operating hours					0.79
21	Salesperson behavior instills confidence	0.81				
22	Services should be performed as per the promised time	0.69				

**PERCEIVED IMPORTANCE OF SERVICE QUALITY FOR APPAREL STORE PATRONAGE**

To determine the importance of service quality for store patronage as perceived by the customers the allocated points out of 100 points collected in the section two of the instrument were averaged. It was found from the analyses that Merchandise (Mean = 29) was rated as the most important factor for store patronage followed by location (Mean = 25), service quality (Mean = 23), price (Mean = 14) and advertising (Mean = 06) (see table).

**TABLE 02: RANKING**

Rank	Store Patronage factors	Mean Score
I	Merchandise	29
II	Location	25
III	Service Quality	23
IV	Price	14
V	Advertising	06

**CONCLUSIONS AND MANAGERIAL IMPLICATIONS**

I) It was found from the study that the two dimensions viz., personal attention and problem solving had high gap scores, indicating disparity between what specialty store consumers expected and their perceived service quality.

Managing the gap between the perceptions and expectations has to be the strategic approach for achieving the objective of enhancing the quality of customer experience. This in turn is bound to have a positive impact on patronage behavior.

Thus the game plan for superior result comprises of rightly understanding the expectations of specialty apparel store shoppers and then managing their perceptions effectively.

Two dimensions warranting the managements' focus are: (i) Personal Attention Dimension (ii) Problem Solving Dimension.

The research has identified the sub-components of these dimensions as:

(i) Personal Attention Dimension:

- Prompt service
- Customized service
- Never too busy to respond
- Polite and courteous salesperson
- Individual attention
- Enthusiasm and interest at heart
- Sales person behavior instills confidence
- Service delivered when promised

(ii) Problem Solving Dimension:

- Interest in solving problems
- Expected to deal with customer queries
- Willingness to help customers
- Knowledgeable salesperson

Based on the analyses of the waitage attributed to these dimensions and the sub components there of, following inferences can be drawn:

1. Shoppers at the Specialty Apparel Stores are more individualistic, have special psychological needs and hence expect customized solutions.
2. They would like to be assisted by the Sales persons in the process of making choice.
3. They expect special treatment offered in a polite manner.

The gap score is indicative of the fact that their experience falling much short of their expectations. This implies that there is an ample scope for enhancing the quality of experience if the management rightly understands the expectations of the concerned customers.

Three priority areas needing management cognizance are:

1. Number of Sales Staff in the shop- (Especially during peak times)- Is it adequate?
2. Skill set and attitude of the Sales Staff in the shop- Is it all right or does it need refinement?
3. Lay out of the shop- does it facilitate superior customer experience?

II) Further, it was found that some amount of disparity existed for the tangible dimension.

Regarding Tangible Dimension influencing Service Quality Perception, it can be sub divided in to Visual appeal of the store and the appearance of the Sales Staff (Which have scores 65 and 55 respectively).

It is obvious that the expectations of specialty store shoppers are guided by their own superior self image and hence they exteriors and ambience to be of superior standing.

Unlike Departmental Stores and Discount Shops, Specialty Stores need to pay extra attention for satisfying this subtle motive by providing exclusive experience.

III) The store patronage ranking indicates the important factors which receive consideration from the customers.

The factors determining patronage are:

Variety and choice appears to be the greatest determinant of Patronage behavior.

This implies that the investments on inventory cannot be compromised so as to ensure wide choice and availability at all the times.

Location and Service Quality though appear in that order; the distance between them is quite narrow. These two too have significant impact on patronage with the score of 23 and 25 respectively.

Due diligence has to be followed while making the locational choice while service quality has to be constantly monitored.

To conclude, based on the research it can be stated that:

1. The two dimensions of Service Quality Viz. Personal Attention and Problem Solving attitude of the Sales Staff are the most critical elements.
2. Merchandise, Location and Service are significant determinants of Patronage Behavior.
3. The management can focus their minds on above stated areas to enhance the quality of customer experienced and there by improving patronage probability.

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