GURU’S VIEW
Service quality: beyond cognitive assessment
Bo Edvardsson
Service Research Center, Karlstad University, Karlstad, Sweden

Abstract
Purpose – The aim of this article is to contribute to widening the scope of service quality by focusing on dimensions beyond cognitive assessment. The focus is on the role of customers’ emotions in service experiences.

Design/methodology/approach – The article first discusses the service concept and implications for service quality. It then focuses on the role of customer experiences, and then discusses the role of emotions in service quality.

Findings – The paper presents six propositions related to service experiences when consuming services and the role of emotions in customer-perceived service quality.

Originality/value – The paper contributes to widening the scope of service quality by focusing on dimensions beyond cognitive assessment.

Keywords Customer service management, Customers, Perception, Consumer behaviour

Paper type Viewpoint

1. Introduction and aim
Is perceived service quality more than the outcome of customers’ cognitive assessment? So far in service quality research, the focus has mainly been on the cognitive dimensions and on quality factors or attributes linked to service offerings in defining, conceptualizing and measuring service quality. Service experiences and customers’ emotions during consumption have been very little researched. An important assumption in this article is that service quality can be understood from both a cognitive and an emotional perspective. An emotional response may start a cognitive process, and thinking may start emotional and affective responses. Service experiences may result in both cognitive and emotional responses, thus forming the basis for perceived service quality.

In literature on customer satisfaction, consumption emotions refer to the set of emotional responses elicited specifically during consumption experiences (Westbrook and Oliver, 1991). Bagozzi et al. (1999) define emotions as mental states of readiness that arise from cognitive appraisals of events or one’s own thoughts. Oliver (1977, p. 319) suggests that emotion “coexists along various cognitive judgments”. Consumption emotions have been conceptualized as distinct categories of emotional expressions: anger, fear, joy, or as a limited number of dimensions underlying emotional categories: pleasantness/unpleasantness, relaxation/action or calmness/excitement (see e.g. Plutchik, 1980). Positive emotions may lead to positive word-of-mouth behavior, while negative emotions may result in complaining behavior. Emotions tend to have an influence on quality perceptions and customer behavior (Liljander and Strandvik, 1997). Customers respond to an event in certain ways in order to maintain positive emotions and to avoid negative emotions (Stauss and Neuhaus,
“During the consumption experience, various types of emotions can be elicited, and these customer emotions convey important information on how the customer will ultimately assess the service encounter and subsequently, the overall relationship quality” (Wong 2004, p. 369). Hence, the more we know about drivers of negative and positive customer emotions the better we understand customer perceived service quality and the better is the basis for managing service quality.

Service quality has so far largely been viewed as a cognitive evaluation of the performance of a service or a service provider (Brady and Cronin, 2001; Oliver, 1997). The aim of this article is to contribute to widening the scope of service quality by focusing on dimensions beyond cognitive assessment. The focus is on the role of customers’ emotions in service experiences. Propositions related to service experiences when consuming services and the role of emotions in customer perceived service quality will be presented.

The article is structured in the following way: first, the service concept and implications for service quality are discussed. Second, the role of customer experiences is focused on. Third, the role of emotions in service quality is discussed.

2. The concept service and implications for service quality

Scholars have defined the service concept in many different ways[1]. Most often activities, deeds, processes and interactions are used when defining the concept of service (Solomon et al., 1985; Lovelock, 1991; Zeithaml and Bitner, 2003; Vargo and Lusch, 2004). Lovelock (1991) defines services as “a process or performance rather than a thing”. Most definitions also focus on the customer, and on the fact that services are provided as solutions to customer problems (Grönroos, 2001). We may conclude that service quality is linked to activities, interactions and solutions to customer problems.

Edvardsson et al. (2005) conclude that the most common service characteristics – intangibility, heterogeneity, inseparability and perishability (IHIP) – have most often been discussed through the lens of the service provider, not the lens of the customer. The issues raised as a consequence of the IHIP characteristics are all related to service delivery and how to manage services from the provider’s perspective, not how to co-produce and consume services from the customer’s perspective.

Services are produced, delivered and consumed during – in time and space – overlapping processes in which customers have a role as co-producers carrying out activities and deeds as well as being part of interactions (with e.g. front-line employees, other customers and technology) which will influence or decide both process quality and outcome quality. Therefore, service quality perceptions are formed during the production, delivery and consumption processes:

\[ P1 \]. Service quality perceptions are formed during production, delivery and consumption processes.

\[ P2 \]. Customers have roles as co-producers by carrying out activities as well as being part of interactions influencing both process quality and outcome quality.

3. Service quality and service experiences

In the marketing literature, experiences are often used to refer to a certain group of services including travel, music, theater, restaurants, hotels and culture. The core of these services has to do with hedonic consumption (Hirshman and Holbrook, 1982).
The experience concept is now also used to add value to consumer services, for instance in telecommunications (services), educational (services), hotel (services) and airline services. Ritz Carlton and Singapore Airlines, for example, focus not only on traditional service quality issues and factors such as reliability and assurance, but also on creating favorable customer experiences.

Here, a service experience is defined as the service encounter and/or service process that creates the customer’s cognitive, emotional and behavioral responses which result in a mental mark, a memory (in line with Johnston and Clark (2001)). Some of the service experiences are especially favorable and others particularly unfavorable. Both tend to stay in the customer’s (long-term) memory. These experiences will have a strong impact on customers’ quality perceptions. According to (Voss, 2003, p. 26), organizations focus more and more on experiences to engage customers, to create and support brands and to differentiate themselves.

The shift from a focus on physical products to service concepts is not always enough today. Manufacturer of physical products emphasize not only product and service quality, but also stress experience-based quality. Examples are Volvo in the car industry and IKEA in the furniture business. Products become platforms for service experiences, and experience-based quality is emphasized. Service quality issues have thus become a subject of great importance also for manufacturing companies and not only for companies in traditional service industries:

P3. Service quality is perceived and determined by the customer on the basis of co-production, delivery and consumption experiences.

P4. Favorable and unfavorable customer experiences seem to be more and more important in forming service quality perceptions.

4. The role of emotions in service quality
Berry et al. (2002) emphasize “managing the total customer experience”. They argue for two categories of service quality clues: recognizing clues of experience related to functionality and clues of experience related to emotions.

Customer delight, loyalty and profitability are linked to favorable customer experiences (Pine and Gilmore, 1999). What distinguishes the excellent from the average companies often has to do with these experiences and not only a value for money outcome and cognitive assessment (Johnston and Clark, 2001). An emotional reaction is part of a quality and favorable experience (Cronin, 2003; Sherry, 1998). This is in line with Mano and Oliver’s (1993) study on utilitarian and hedonic consumption judgments. They argue that “…satisfaction is naturally tied to cognitive judgments and to affective reactions elicited in consumption” (Mano and Oliver, 1993, p. 451).

Oliver (1977) claims that the role of emotions is gaining attention as a central element in service quality management. However, the literature does not offer clear models (Grönroos, 2001). There are some recent studies suggesting that emotion is a fundamental attribute in satisfaction and that satisfaction models should include a separate emotional component (Cronin et al., 2000). Stauss and Neuhaus (1997) claim that satisfaction studies focus on the cognitive component and that not enough attention has been paid to the emotional component of service quality. Wong (2004, p. 366) found that negative emotions have a stronger effect on satisfaction with quality than positive emotions:
There is a lack of empirical investigations of the role of emotion in service encounters and its relationship with key concepts in service quality management.

We need to know more about the role of emotions in forming quality perceptions:

P5. There are two categories of service quality clues: clues of experience related to functionality and clues of experience related to emotions.

P6. Positive and negative emotions seem to be more and more important in forming service quality perceptions, and negative emotions have a stronger effect on perceived service quality than positive emotions.

5. Discussion
This paper starts with the question: “Is perceived service quality more than the outcome of customers’ cognitive assessment?” Six propositions on service quality emphasizing dimensions not often being focused on explicitly in service quality research have been formulated. Services experiences and customers’ emotions have been discussed. The process, interactive and relational dimensions have been suggested by viewing service quality as embedded in processes, interactions and relationships. By understanding drivers of emotions during service experiences through the lens of the customers, new challenges related to service quality have been raised to be dealt with when managing service quality. These challenges should also be focused on in future research.

In this paper it has been proposed that:

- Service quality perceptions are formed during production, delivery and consumption processes.
- Customers have roles as co-producers by carrying our activities as well as being part of interactions influencing both process quality and outcome quality.
- Service quality is perceived and determined by the customer on the basis of co-production, delivery and consumption experiences.
- Favorable and unfavorable customer experiences seem to be more and more important in forming service quality perceptions.
- There are two categories of service quality clues: clues of experience related to functionality and clues of experience related to emotions.
- Positive and negative emotions seem to be more and more important in forming service quality perceptions, and negative emotions have a stronger effect on perceived service quality than positive emotions.

Note
1. This section is partly based on Edvardsson et al., 2005).

References


Sherry, J. Jr (Ed.) (1998), ServiceScapes: The Concept of Place in Contemporary Markets, American Marketing Association, Chicago, IL.


Further reading

