

Service Quality

By Sunil Thawani

All organizations – in manufacturing or in service business - encounter difficulties in attaining Quality. During the last few decades extensive work has been done to identify and solve quality problems in manufacturing sector.

With increasing competition, the product characteristics are becoming difficult to differentiate. Customers have started considering Service features to make buying decisions. Let us look at some of the critical characteristics and design requirements in Service Quality.

What is Service?

In its' simplest terms " Service is work performed for someone else " e.g. Professional services (legal, medical), Personal services (laundry, beauty shops), Financial (commercial banks, insurance), Government (welfare, municipal services) etc.

Key Characteristics of Service Companies:

A service company sells the benefits in variety of ways like:

- Lease of facilities e.g. apartments, office space, virtual market place
- Use of facilities e.g. bus ride, web space
- Professional advice e.g. medical, legal
- Health maintenance e.g. hospital
- Product maintenance e.g. automobile repairs
- Relief from self service e.g. restaurant, laundry

Direct contact with Customers: In contrast to manufacturing, a service company sells its services directly to its users and therefore comes into contacts with hundreds and thousands of its customers. It creates huge individual transactions and has direct impact on customers (people). Due to these characteristics, Service companies have good opportunity for getting direct feedback from its customers as compared to manufacturing who are relatively " insulated" from their customers.

Captivity of Customer/ property: The extensive personal contact of the service company leads to inherently uncomfortable relationship with the customer e.g. customer " surrenders " his money to money exchange center or baggage for transport. Service company holds this property in captivity and a failure/ error/ delay can greatly cause inconvenience. In some cases consumer himself feels captive e.g. waiting in line in a queue to avail joy/ bus ride.

For failure of service may be compensated for a loss but he is seldom compensated for his loss of time or annoyance. For this he can go to competition or do damage to the image of service company by publicizing his experience.

Instant Consumption: Another characteristic of some services is that it is “instantly” consumed e.g. advice from a lawyer or a Consultant. Possibility for withdrawing or rectifying is limited.

Designing for Service Quality:

While designing for quality, Service companies need to give special emphasis on the wide spectrum of needs, likes and status of users etc.

Technical Support: Consumers have extensive need for such assistance e.g. to diagnose his illness or fixing computer or seeking explanation for complex legal documents, interpretation of standards like ISO: 9001.

Simplicity: To offer service to thousands and millions, the need for simplicity is absolute e.g. unpacking and assembly instructions for furniture. Some consumers are unable to understand printed instructions and some are not willing to take time to read and learn e.g. operating instructions for an electronic gadget and thereby creating problem to themselves as well as for the service provider.

Auxiliary Services: Some companies provide free services as part of the quality of design e.g. provision of wash rooms and cleaning of car wind shield while filling petrol at gas station. It is provided partly to meet customer needs and partly to meet competition.

Time as key parameter of Service Quality

The striking feature of service industry is the element of time taken to access and provide service.

Access Time: This is the length of time from clients' first effort to gain the attention of service company until he has got the attention e.g. time taken to answer the customer call from first ring or opening web page.

Queuing Time: Due to variable load, customer may have to wait. In such situations consumer is concerned with the length of the queue (waiting time) and the integrity of the queue (adherence to the principle of first come first serve).

Action Time: Time taken from taking the customers order till service requested is provided. In designing action time, it is important to consider customers view point of elapse time. E.g. to a shipping company, travel time may be from port to

port, but to the customer time from his warehouse to destination warehouse will be basis of his decision.

Another critical aspect of service time is to consider the cumulative effect of the delay on the customers business. E.g. if a cargo shipment of steel plates is delayed by a week, the customer's production schedule is upset, thereby leading to his failure on commitment to his customer.

“Well Being “ of Consumer

Atmosphere: Some service industries like travel, leisure, entertainment create an atmosphere suiting the taste of their clients who are a mixed lot like business travelers, young children, retired, newly married couples etc.

Feeling of Importance: Many consumers view the relationship between client and service company similar to master and servant. It leads him to expect attention, courtesy, respect, flattering of his ego etc. The service companies are well aware of it and design it in their customer relationship processes.

Information: Another element of well-being is to know what to expect e.g. when the flight is delayed; customer wants to know the revised departure time. “Lack of information adds to his frustration and raises his anxiety. The need to know “ need of the customer is based on instinctive human desire for mastery of over the environment and derives a feeling of satisfaction from the knowledge.

Safety: Since the user entrusts his property, self to the service provider, “service safety “ becomes as vital as the product safety e.g. airline carrier or restaurant food.

Continuity of Service: To maintain continuity of service, many service providers need to plan for alternatives in case of failures e.g. alternate routings by airlines or 24 hour, 7 days a week call centers.

To win customers, organizations need to plan and design service characteristics into their business processes.

This article is based on the teachings of Dr. Josphe Juran

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