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Delivering Superior Customer Value and Satisfaction Through Service Quality

Shashi Nanda¹ and Sujata Khandai²

¹Assistant Professor, PGDAV College, University of Delhi, Delhi, India.

E-mail: shashi.nanda@student.amity.edu

²Deputy Dean and Officiating Director, ACCF, Amity University, Noida, India.

ABSTRACT

Service quality is a critical element for the growth, survival and success of any firm. It is a strategic tool and a competitive weapon in the hands of the firms and has gained significant importance in the present competitive business scenario. This conceptual paper is an attempt towards a better understanding of the conceptualization of the service quality from the viewpoint of various researchers and its relation with customer value and customer satisfaction. A satisfied customer provides longevity in his stay with the business and observes a greater zeal to patronize the service provider with an intention to positively respond toward relationship building and customer loyalty.

Keywords: Service Quality, SERVQUAL, SERVPERF, Customer Satisfaction, Relationship Building, Customer Loyalty.

1. INTRODUCTION

A service is a kind of act or performance which is essentially intangible, heterogeneous, inseparable and perishable, without any kind of transfer of ownership to its customers (Rushton & Carson, 1985). Rendering of services, by the service provider to his customers requires human, mechanical or a combination of both the efforts that results in providing benefits to them. These activities are generally tied up to a physical product whose performance appears to be necessarily intangible. Without any relocation of ownership, the chosen benefits are provided to the receiver of services. The services sector comprise of hospitality, construction, banking, trade, financing, insurance, travel, communication, repairs, restaurants/food services,

social/personal services and many more (Lovelock, et al., 2007). Services can be seen to apply a unique approach towards marketing. The services are generally performance based and more labour intensive with service provider, being part of services. The intangibility characteristic of services is a special challenge for the service marketer, along with the task of handling the people factor (Berry, 1987).

The American Society for Quality defines “quality as the characteristics of a product/service that bear on its ability to satisfy stated or implied customer needs”. Quality has a predictable influence on performance as it is closely related to customer value and their satisfaction (Kotler, 2003). Today, quality acts as a basic core offering which a customer intends to expect from his/her service provider, being no longer a competitive weapon in the hands of firms (Kandampully, 1996). However, a service quality differentiator is able to draw sustainable competitive advantage over and above his competitors. Service quality is essentially an important ingredient in the services marketing that is the core requirement for satisfying customers. By providing high service quality to the customers, a business can keep its customers satisfied and at the same time maintain its economic competitiveness (Culiberg, et al., 2010).

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

In the recent years, the service quality concept has been very popular amongst academicians, researchers, and business entrepreneurs. Researchers and academicians have offered varied views on its conceptualization and operationalization, resulting in considerable interest and deliberation in terms of both defining and measuring it without an overall consensus on either (Wisniewski, 2001). As a result, different authors have defined service quality differently and built on diverse conceptualizations, alternative scales are suggested from time to time for the measurement of service quality. Service quality is defined as “a global judgment or attitude relating to the overall excellence or superiority of the service” (Parasuraman, et al., 1988). It is also defined as “a customer’s post-consumption evaluation of service that compares expectations with perceptions of performance”. SERVQUAL is a popular and widely used multiple-item measurement scale, designed from the evaluation of a customer on a number of attributes related to the services. The SERVQUAL gap is measured by evaluating the expectations, i.e. what they feel they should be offered by the service providers with their performance perceptions, in order to meet customer’s purpose successfully. Determining the variance between the expectation and perception scores is essential to measure the gap. A positive gap indicates that the services delivered have been perceived to have exceeded the expectations of the consumer making them feel happy and delighted. On the contrary, a negative gap shows that the expectations of the consumer are not met by the service provider in rendering services, contributing towards their dissatisfaction (Parasuraman, et al., 1985).

Service Quality is studied as “the gap between customer perceptions of what happened during the service transaction and his expectations of how the service transaction should have been performed” (Parasuraman, et al., 1985). The outcome of a service is only one factor that evaluates the quality of a service performance; the process of service delivery is equally important for evaluating its quality. Based on this conceptualization, a multiple-item service quality measurement scale, SERVQUAL, containing 22 attributes was introduced which consisted of two parts, each measuring the expectation score and perception score of the consumer on the quality construct of a service. The authors tested the conceptualization and operationalization across the four service activities, viz, retail banking, credit cards, securities brokerage, and product repair and maintenance. Initially, the proposed dimensions consisted of reliability, responsiveness, competence, access, courtesy, communication, credibility, security, knowing the customer and tangibles (Parasuraman, et al., 1985). On revisit, revision and refinement, the scale was brought down to five dimensions of service quality with 21 attributes that comprised of:

1. Reliability (delivering the promised outputs at the stated level).
2. Responsiveness (providing speedy service and help to customers).
3. Assurance (ability of the firm to stimulate trust and confidence in the firm through knowledge, politeness and trustworthiness of the employees).
4. Empathy (readiness and competence to give personalized attention to a customer).
5. Tangibles (appearance of a service firm's facilities, employees equipment and communication materials) (Parasuraman, et al., 1994).

CONSUMER

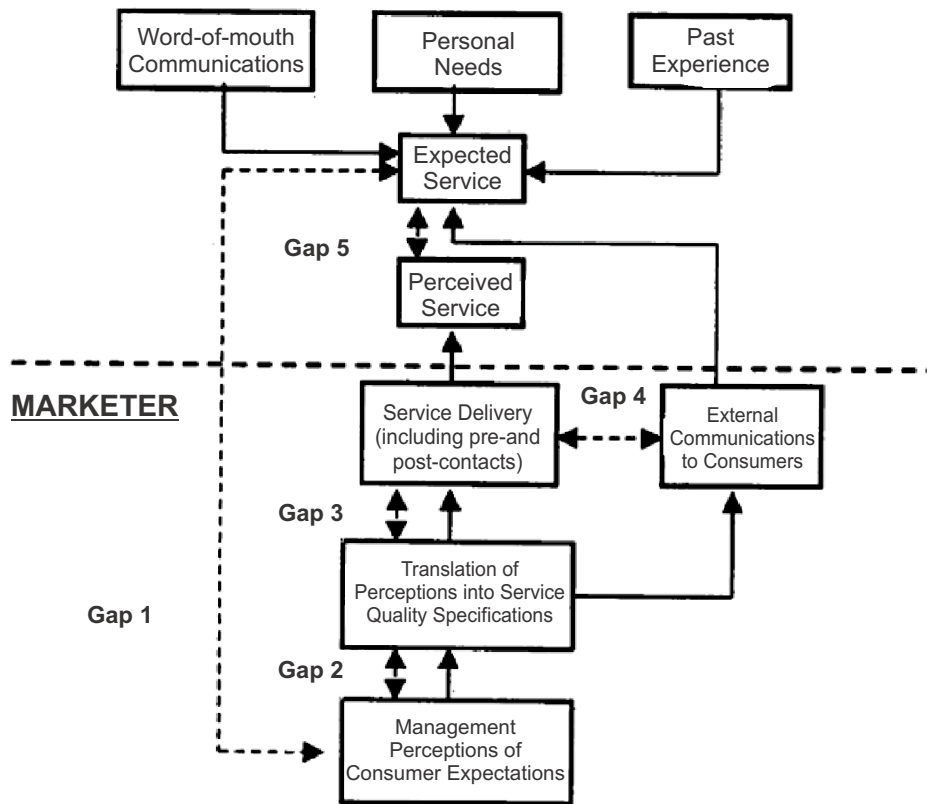


Figure 1: Gaps in Service Delivery Process

Source: Parasuraman, Zeithaml and Berry (1988).

Gap 1: The deviation between the expectations of the consumer and the management's perception about the consumer's expectations (Expectation Gap).

Gap 2: The deviation between management's perceptions of consumer expectations and the service quality specifications of the firm (Specification Gap).

Gap 3: The deviation between service quality specifications and the delivery of services (Performance Gap).

Gap 4: The deviation between delivery of services and external communication (Communication Gap).

Gap 5: The deviation between the expected services and perceived services (Perception Gap).

The first four gaps lie within the management’s jurisdiction and the fifth gap is prominently recognized to lie within the consumer’s zone. It is the ‘perception gap’ which became the very foundation of the service quality conceptualization and operationalisation, as it relates to the expectation of the consumer with regard to his perception of performance of the service provider in delivering services. It is quite interesting to deliberate that the original gap 5 divides into two parts, viz, gap 5A and gap 5B, representing ‘Measure of Service Superiority’(MSS) and ‘Measure of Service Adequacy’ (MSA) respectively. Gap 5A is a result of disparity between projected and perceived services and Gap5B results from the disparity between perceived and adequate services. There exists a competitive advantage for the firms to provide services over and above the adequate level of services (Zeithmal et al., 1993). To determine the service quality stimuli effectively, the gap analysis model is extensively adopted and applied to various service firms. It is of paramount importance for identifying the problems associated with service quality, understanding the reason for gap and discovering suitable means of taking corrective action for the purpose of removing the gaps.

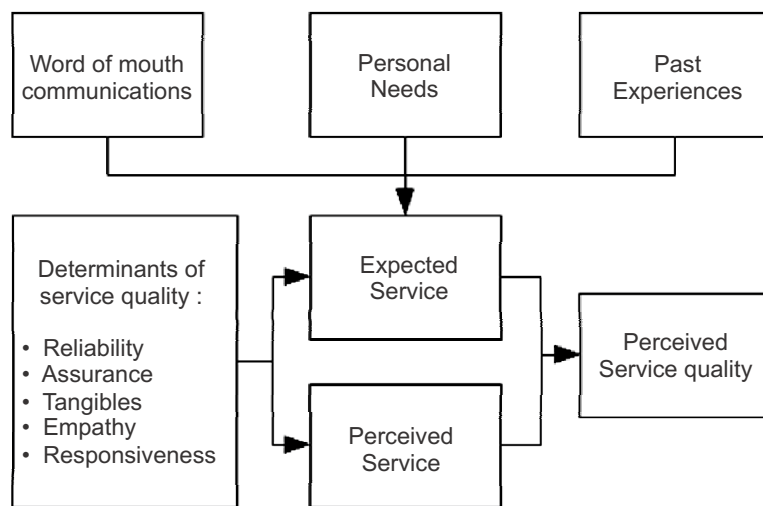


Figure 2: Determinants of Service Quality

Source: Parasuraman, Zeithaml and Berry (1988).

The application of SERVQUAL in the four sectors, viz, product repair and maintenance, credit cards, retail banking, securities brokerage has been praiseworthy that positioned the scale as a generic instrument capable of measuring the degree and discrepancy of consumer’s expectation and perception. The scale happens to be a significant milestone in the literature of service quality and widely applied in varied service locations. It has been used by various researchers, from time to time, in its original or modified form. The instrument worked well by retaining its high validity and reliability level across different sectors.

Nevertheless, the wide admiration and acceptance of the American School of thought, the SERVQUAL scale, it has its part of disapproval too. The conceptualization of service quality constructs, focusses only on ‘the functional quality’ (process), neglecting ‘the technical quality’ (output) component altogether. Placing thrust on ‘process of service delivery’ alone cannot help retaining and generating customers; the ‘outcome of services’ appears to hold enormous potential in building the customer’s patronage. Though, SERVQUAL has been very popular and greatly in demand by different service sectors, the disregard of ‘what’ part of service delivery, a vital component, can no longer seem to be avoided (Gronroos, 1990). The focus on the ‘output’ component encouraged the Nordic/European School of thought to contest the

Parasuraman’s SERVQUAL model. Accordingly, the customer’s perspective of quality comprises of the two important constructs, viz, the technical quality and the functional quality. The technical quality refers to ‘what is delivered’(outcome of service performance), while the functional quality relates to ‘how the end result is delivered’ (process of service delivery) (Gronroos, 1984; Lehtinen and Lehtinen, 1982). The model proposed that the functional quality occurs prior to the technical quality and also results in the technical quality (Gronroos, 1984, 1990).

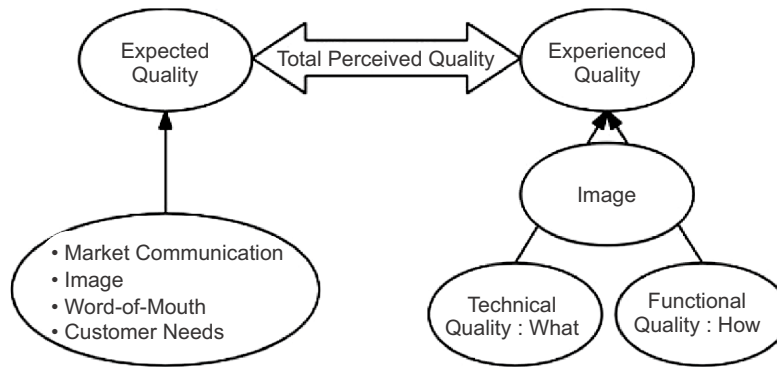


Figure 3: Service Quality Model

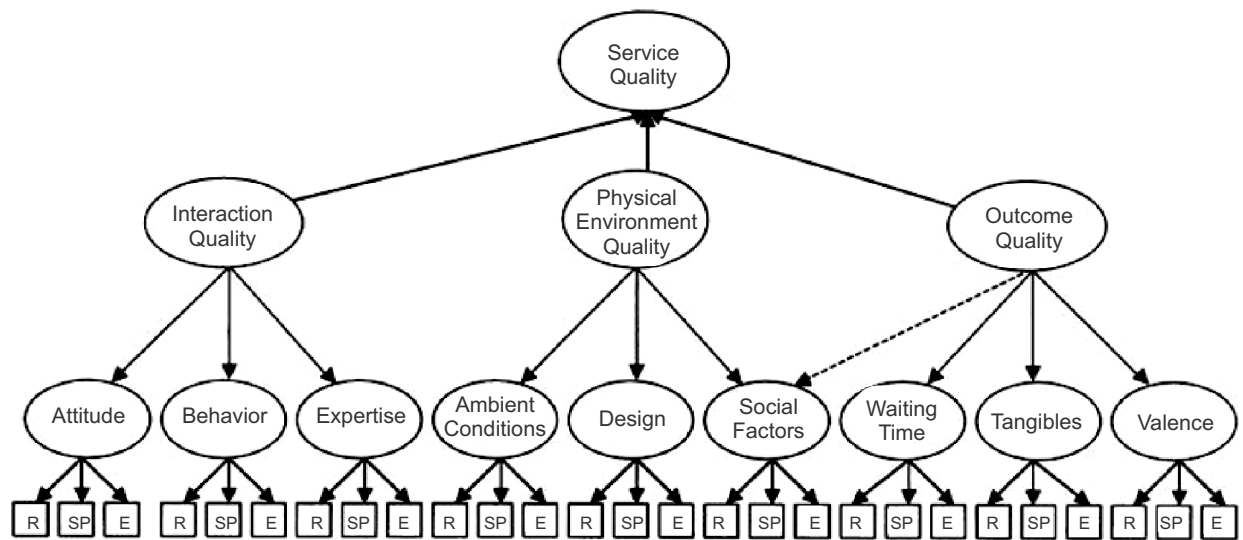
Source: Gronroos (1990)

The general impression, a service provider presents to the current and prospective customers, through his ‘image’ component helps in determining the expected service quality. WOM communication, the individual wants and desires of the customer, and the interpretation by the customer about the market communication of the service provider also plays an imperative role in determining the expected service quality. In contrast, the experienced/perceived quality is a bundle of the actual services offered to him (technical/outcome) and the fashion in which these services are delivered (functional/process). Interestingly, the ‘image’ component also affects the experienced quality. Past encounters, corporate advertising and word of mouth communications are amongst the basic components that help in the establishment of the image/ corporate quality of a firm. An affirmative image provides strength and benefits to the firm as customers incline to overlook minor gaps in the service delivery. On the other hand, a negative image stimulates the consumer to perceive even a minor lapse in a magnificent manner. A regular occurrence of mistakes definitely hampers the corporate image (Gronroos, 1990). In some of the later studies, it was proposed that consumer’s perception of service quality views ‘image’ as a mediating factor rather than an independent constituent of service quality construct. It takes many years for a firm to build up its image, mainly with the support of functional traits and technical excellence. (Kangand James, 2004).

Another model of service quality, SERVPERF has drawn substantial attention, which is assessed only by the perceptions of performance/service delivery. According to Cronin, SERVPERF assumes that “the respondents provide their ratings by automatically comparing performance perceptions with performance expectations and that measuring expectations directly is unnecessary”. Operationally this indicates that the respondent is asked to provide scores for performance items only in SERVQUAL in context to their expectation rather than asking these independently and then computing the gap. This maintains the service quality conceptualization along with appreciating the advantage of being statistically more reliable and reducing the questionnaire length. In view of construct operationalization, the ‘expectation’ component has been thrown out, for the methodological problems associated with its measurement (Cronin, 1992).

One of the usually used definitions of service quality is the “extent to which a service meets customer’s needs or expectations” (Lewis, et al., 1990). It is also viewed as “lying along a continuum ranging from ‘ideal quality’ to ‘totally unacceptable quality’ with some points along the continuum representing satisfactory quality” (Churchill et al., 1982). It is also considered as “the difference between customer’s expectations for service performance prior to the service encounter and their perceptions of the actual service received” (Asubonteng et al., 1996).

It is necessary to have full spectrum of issues, attributes and dimensions in the measurement scale of service quality, on which the consumer evaluates his perceived quality. In this direction, an integrated, hierarchical and a multidimensional scale have been identified and three key dimensional antecedents for measuring overall service quality was proposed. These distinct dimensions comprise of interaction, outcome and environment quality, which in turn comprise of three sub dimensions each that help in defining the service quality perceptions. The ‘interaction quality’ relates to the service provider and the customer having a chance to meet each other and includes ‘attitude, behavior and expertise’. The ‘outcome quality’ states that the final result of service delivery is in the hands of the customer and includes ‘waiting time, tangibles and valence’. Finally, the ‘environment quality’ is the extent of seminal role played by the tangibles at the service place in forming perception of the customer of overall service quality experience and includes ‘ambient conditions, design and social factors’. The third level of the hierarchical model of service quality represents a positive perception of quality delivered when it accounts for reliability, responsiveness and empathy. This third order factor model tested in the four service businesses, viz, fast food, photograph developing, amusement parks and dry cleaning supported the suggested service quality conceptualization (Brady and Cronin, 2001).



Note: R = a reliability item, SP = a responsiveness term, E = an empathy item. The broken line indicates that the path was added as part of model respecification

Figure 4: Brady and Cronin’s Service Quality Model

Source: Brady and Cronin (2001).

It is relevant to state, that the concept of *e*-SQ is a latest development and a newer paradigm in the field service quality, where the customers assess the quality of a website through their interaction experience with the site, both, during and after the services are provided to them. It is the manner in which a web site expedites a well-organized and effective spending, purchasing, and delivery of online products. At the perceptual quality level, the identified *e*-SQ dimensions comprise of 11 attributes, viz, Reliability, Responsiveness, Access, Flexibility, Ease of navigation, Efficiency, Assurance/trust, Security/privacy, Price knowledge, Site aesthetics, Customization/personalization. In order to provide higher service quality, the web presence of managers must comprehend the evaluation criteria of the customers in relation to the online services provided to them. It is worth mentioning that electronic service quality is also captured through another two scales, viz, E-S-QUAL (*e*-core service quality scale) and E-RecS-QUAL (*e*-recovery service quality scale), where former is a 22-item scale with 4 dimensions and latter is a scale with 11 items and 3 dimensions (Zeithaml, Parasuraman and Malhotra, 2005).

In the process of delivering high perceived service quality, a service provider attempts to create a superior customer value and satisfaction. Various models and their respective dimensions indicate the development of the concept of service quality and its operationalization towards improved market share, profitability and a loyal base of customers.

2.1. Service Quality: A Strategic and Competitive Decision

To execute productive and profitable operations, the service provider has to be pleasant, competent, polite, helpful, knowledgeable and empathic while offering services to the consumers. Over the last three decades, service quality has developed as one of the pillars of marketing of services and influences the level of satisfaction and loyalty of customers; their repurchase intention and firm's profitability. As a result, service quality determines the success or failure of service firms. It has emerged both as a strategic and a competitive tool, in the hands of a service provider to attract, maintain and grow customers. To deliver quality in services is a long term strategic decision that determines the success and survival of service firms. A customer- focused approach indicates that quality commences with customer needs and ends with their satisfaction (Kotler, 2003). In the highly dynamic and competitive business environment, service quality is gaining increased attention from the service providers. A marketer develops a stronger competitive edge when he acquires the ability to identify the needs, differentiate the customers, interact with them personally and customize the services according to their requirement. To offer a wide range of services is no more an influential means of differentiation, as competitors can easily replicate the same. To draw competitive and sustainable advantage, the provider of services has to concentrate on the quality dimensions of the services, which is more difficult to duplicate. The 'how' part plays greater role in helping build the business, rather than the 'what' part of services. An expressive peculiarity can be drawn through actual service quality, rather than the range of offered assorted services, which though provides customer satisfaction, but by no means the main driver (Culiberg, 2010). It is a prerequisite for the service provider to give exceptional care to the service quality, as it is within their control and shall enhance satisfaction and positive buying behaviour amongst the consumers (Padma et al., 2009).

2.2. Customer Value and Satisfaction: An Overview

Customer value is usually the difference between benefits and cost, as perceived by the customer. The paradigm of value is distributed into three constructs: the subjectivist view, which is dependent on human experience and it is considered to exist post service encounter; the objectivist view, which is autonomous

of such experience and is inherent within the service encounter itself; and interactionist view, which combines both the views, an interaction between the personal/situational preference and the consumer's experience of a service helps in creating value (Holbrook, 1994; Walker and Johnson, 2009). Being an important component of consumer behaviour, the value component is a trade-off between the relevant 'give' and 'get', based on the overall evaluation of the utility derived as between the perception of what is surrendered (time, money, effort) for what is acquired (quality, volume, convenience) (Zeithaml, 1988). The emphasis on customer value by the vendor is appropriate and essential as a consumer is unlikely to enter into a transaction unless he perceives the 'gets' to be closely equal to or more than the 'gives' (Jain and Jain, 2015).

Amongst the others, customer satisfaction is another significant determinant of consumer behaviour, judged as the fulfilment response of the consumer, in terms of pleasurable level, including the over and under fulfilment levels as perceived by the consumer on his/her consumption of services (Oliver, 1997). Similarly, satisfaction, being the very foundation and the basic requirement to stay in business, is also understood as "the post-purchase appraisal of products/services provided the expectations are known before the purchase" (Kotler, 2003). Customer satisfaction is achieved when the actual performance happens to be greater than the expectation of the one's being served (Dehghan, et al., 2012). In this context, customer satisfaction is confused with service quality. Researchers and academicians have viewed service quality as a distinct construct from customer satisfaction, where perceived service quality has been described as 'a form of attitude', which describes a long – run appraisal of one's overall experience and satisfaction is related to a specific transaction undertaken by a consumer (Bitner, 1990; Bolton and Drew, 1991; Parasuraman, et al., 1988). The service provider has to decide between the attainment of his objective of creating 'satisfied' consumers or delivering highest level of 'service quality' as perceived by the customer. Higher the level of perceived quality of services, the better is the customer satisfaction level (Parasuraman et al., 1985).

2.3. Service Quality: An Antecedent of Customer Satisfaction

To generate, maintain and enhance a base of loyal customers is not only a challenging task, but also requires a lot of time, effort and money. The past researches have supported the contention that an intermediary role is played by customer satisfaction in developing a link between quality in services and loyalty in services (Caruana, 2002). A well-defined and delivered service quality is a challenging task towards attaining success for the firms in retaining existing customers and attracting potential customers. Understanding the needs and expectations of the target audience, identifying their problems and satisfying them to their best interest, will bring about a greater market share and profitability for the firm by way of retaining their existing customers. Much of the research studies indicate that, 'it is five times more expensive to acquire new customers than to maintain current ones' (Athanasopoulou, 2009). Many of the past studies have revealed that acquiring new customers is much costlier than retaining the existing ones.

By providing improved and upgraded service quality, a service provider maintains a level of competitiveness in satisfying its customers. Satisfaction, through better service quality, is a popular marketing tool and long term strategic decision for retaining the customers; allowing them to positively advocate the services to their friends and peers and generating future repurchase intentions. There is always a need and preference for high quality of goods/services at the marketplace which result in quantifiable benefits in terms of revenues, cost reductions and increased market share (Anderson et al., 1994). The satisfaction level is ascertained by the ability of the service provider towards meeting the norms and expectations of

the customer. In spite of good services offered, the customers will persistently expect better-quality services (Fornell, 1992; Oliva et al., 1992). Although delighted, a customer still wants improvement in respect of better services and a continuous positive change. The marketer must take special care and extra precaution while serving the customers as every augmented product soon becomes an expected product.

2.4. Service Quality: Impact on Customer Loyalty and Relationship Building

The discipline of marketing assigns itself with the accomplishing of the task of acquiring and retaining customers. The rising concern for the retention of customers has led to focused attention on the concept of enhanced service quality which intrigues researchers to develop a deeper understanding into the theory of service marketing, unfolding the research area of service quality. A satisfied customer continues to provide regular business to the service firm which in turn provides long term enhanced business relationships. A good relationship provides a strong linkage between satisfaction, trust and commitment with the loyal customers and stimulates an orientation amongst them towards patronizing the preferred service in future and also spreading a positive word of mouth. Building, maintaining and nurturing healthy relationships with dedicated customers is a deeply held committed and continuous process that contributes towards the growth and development of a service firm (Heskett et al., 1997; Paul et al., 2009). In order to shape a long lasting successful relationship, organisations are trying to offer competitively, the best service quality to them which has proved it to be a necessary ingredient in persuading customers to prefer choosing one organisation over the other. By maintaining consistency in superior quality through excellence in delivery, the firms are able create customer loyalty (Kandampully and Duddy, 1999). Generally, the loyal customers witness greater level of satisfaction, are less likely to switch brands and patronize the firm by continually providing repeat sales.

2.5. Service Quality Failures and its recovery

In the context of service marketing, sometimes the buyers face substantial and inevitable uncertainty arising from factors, which include intangibility, simultaneity, complexity, heterogeneity, lack of service knowledge, perishability and long service delivery horizon. These factors contribute towards uncertainty, which may lead to the unexpected service failure accompanied by the potential to generate negative outcomes. The task of service provider is to concentrate on the experience of the customer, help them reduce their apprehensions and unfavourable buying intentions and pay special attention to their needs and wants (Padma, et al., 2010). It is necessary to avoid repeat shortfalls in service quality and identify the cause of such failures so as to take precautionary and corrective measures in future.

3. CONCLUSIONS

In the light of accelerating interest and deepening research in service marketing area, there is a need for the researcher to extend understanding and explore emerging perspectives in the said area and provide useful managerial insights for the marketing practitioners. In the existing competitive environment, there is a paradigm shift from services acquired to services experienced which promotes the delivery of quality in services to the consumers. To deliver service quality is known to be an indispensable and a vital component for survival, growth and success of the service firms. Failing to understand the relevance of service quality and the quality – satisfaction relationship, the firms may imagine inviting their extinction. It is imperative to gain a remarkable understanding of the functional and technical aspect of services and their effective

operationalization. This stimulates the service firms towards a thought-provoking act of starting to focus on bilateral commitments and intense communication, along with the challenge of generating better and improved services. To retain the current customer base, service firms also concentrate on the competency of its staff with adequate capability and expertise to deliver effective services, handle conflicts and gather feedback from the customers regarding their experiences and suggestions. In order to keep the customer's experience overwhelming, the service providers have to be sincere and reasonable in their approach in fulfilling the basic requirement of establishing, stabilizing and improving the service quality.

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