

An insight into the prerequisites of efficacious service communication

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Abstract

Marketing communication places emphasis on intentionality with the belief that true communication occurs only when the received or created meaning is that was intended. It is perceived that marketers who understand customer motivations to use a particular service category will be in a better position to manage their target markets. If the service providers can communicate effectively with the consumer, they can guide consumer expectations and also influence consumer perception of the nature and quality of service. The challenge before service marketers is to control or influence those factors that affect actual service quality and also the perceived service quality. This entails a thorough understanding of the consumer needs and expectations for service, tangibilizing the service offering, dealing with a myriad of people and delivery issues and keeping promises made to customers (Zeithaml Valarie A., Bitner Mary Jo, 2000). A basic issue in bridging the customer gap becomes a strong marketing communication.

***Key words:** service characteristics, marketing communication, communication prerequisites, communication cues*

Introduction

Marketing communication places emphasis on intentionality with the belief that true communication occurs only when the received or created meaning is that was intended. It is a process in which a service provider, through the use of signs and symbols to convey meaning of the service concept and its promised quality to the consumer in order to affect purchase behavior as well as consumer satisfaction after consumption of the service. This process places emphasis on intentionality i.e., true communication occurs only when the received or created meaning is that was intended. Service providers can control this process and consciously convey messages to the consumer that motivate the consumer in favour of the service offering.

Literature Review

The topic of Service communication has been researched extensively. Sundaram and Webster (2000) have specifically studied the role of nonverbal communication in service encounters. Wei, et al (1999) found that price, facilities, room furnishings and location were the factors that affected the consumer perceptions. James M. Carman (2000), Lee, et al (2000), found that tangibles are a more important factor of service perception in the facility/equipment based industries and responsiveness is a more important factor in people based industries. Numerous organizations have started focusing on ascertaining the customer perceptions of service quality and subsequently devising strategies to communicate the same (Cronin and Taylor, 1992, 1994; Teas, 1993a, 1994; Zeithaml et al., 1996). A particular concern to both practitioners and scholars has been the determination of the most effective means to market service products (Berry and Parasuraman, 1993; Fisk *et al.*, 1993). In this context, the investigation of services advertising has been singled out as a topic that deserves greater attention (Grove, et al, 1997; Mortimer and Mathews, 1998; Parasuraman, 1995; Stafford and Stafford, 2000).

Need for study

Customer expectations as defined by Zeithaml (2000) are the standards of or reference points for performance against which service experiences are compared and are often formulated in terms of what a customer believes should or will happen. Customer perceptions are subjective assessments of actual service experience. In an ideal situation, there should be no gap between customer expectations and perceptions. In other words, customers will feel that they have received the service that they had paid for in exactly the manner they expected. Such a situation will result in perfect customer satisfaction. However, in actual practice it is seldom so. The reasons are many and derive their origin from the inherent characteristics of services. As services cannot be readily displayed or easily communicated to customers, so, their quality cannot be easily evaluated. This leads to an increase in the perceived level of risk (Clow, et al, 1999). In such a case, the service provider has to provide other referral points like pricing, branding, service processes, delivery mechanism, etc. to the customer for ease of making a purchase decision.

Objectives of this research

It is postulated that if the service provider can communicate effectively with the consumer, they can guide consumer expectations and also influence consumer perception of the nature and quality of service. Based on the service literature, this research aims to find out pre requisites for an effective marketing communication of service organisations. Additionally,

the paper tries to identify ways to aid consumer understanding under both verbal and visual cues pertaining to unique characteristics of services.

Effective Communication in services: The prerequisites

1. Understanding sources of customer expectations: Firstly, to be able to communicate effectively, service marketers have to understand the sources of customer expectations. Customer expectations are shaped by both uncontrollable and company controlled factors (Zeithaml, and Bitner, 2000). One way of enhancing consumer understanding is to educate the consumer about the offering, the consumer's expected role and the expected level of satisfaction. In other words, the service provider can focus on bridging Gap 4 (Zeithaml Valarie A., Bitner Mary Jo, 2000) that is, the difference between what is actually offered and the consumer's perception of the offering.

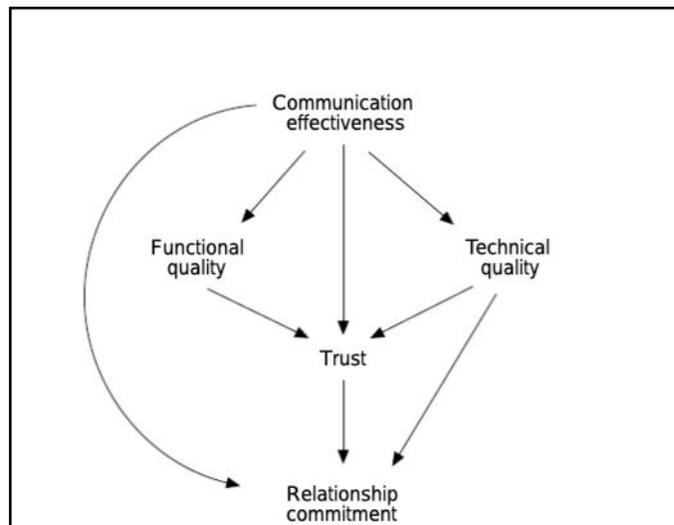


Fig.1 Determinants of

relationship commitment (Sharma and Patterson, 1999)

2. Understanding customer perception of service quality: Consumer perceptions are the basis on which the quality of service is judged. The perception of service quality is an attitude (Iacobucci, et al, 1994). As such it involves combining perceptions or disconfirmations in some fashion to form an overall attitude regarding quality. The conundrum has been to determine what that fashion is. Following Fishbein (1967), most researchers have followed a general model that says the attitude is formed as a function of some combination of attributes that an individual considers to be the components of quality. Many authors have provided reviews of these efforts to find some links to theories that would help uncover what this combining function may look like. Those of Gotlieb, et al (1994), Iacobucci (1994), and Taylor and Baker (1994) are excellent and provide excellent reviews through that year. The importance of the element of human interaction/intervention in the service delivery has been recognized and reiterated by many

other researchers as well (e.g. Mills and Morris, 1986; Norman, 1991; Harber, et al, 1993a, b; Stebbing, 1993; Schneider, et al, 1994, 1996).

3. Identifying role of servicescape in judging quality: The effect of the atmospherics, popularly known as "servicescapes" (Bitner, 1992), does influence customers in numerous ways. Many other authors have also discussed in detail the impact of these servicescapes on the service perceptions by customers (e.g. Kotler, 1973; Shostack, 1977; Booms and Bitner, 1982; Rapoport, 1982; Upah and Fulton, 1985; Zeithaml, et al, 1985; Bitner, 1986; Berry and Clark, 1986; Baker, 1987) and their effect on employees (e.g. Becker, 1981; Davis, 1984; Steele, 1986).

4. Comprehending the relationship between customer expectation and service perception: Within the servicescape, the satisfaction of consumers is dependent on the match between service expectations and service perceptions. Bebeko (2001) suggests that reports of dissatisfaction were higher in services where intangibility was manifested. The most obvious answer to this problem is to add tangibility to the service through communicating with the consumers and focusing on verbal overt communication as well as the nonverbal communication.

5. Identifying role of tangible and intangibles in perception of service quality: Jessica Santos (2002) posited that the level of tangible components has a positive impact on the perceived importance of the tangible dimension in service quality. Bebeko (2000) found that as the intangibility of the process and outcome of services increased the consumers' expectations of service quality also increased. Valerie A. Zeithaml, Leonard L. Berry, and A. Parasuraman in 1993 conducted research to find out nature and sources of customer expectations. Although differences were anticipated across the different comparison pairs, the nature and sources of expectations were found to be similar across the groups.

6. Studying the role of experience or credence quality of the service offering: Another characteristic of services that affect consumer expectations and perceptions is the experience or credence quality of the service offering. Mattila and Wirtz (2002) provide an insight into the pre-purchase behavior of consumers in context of services high on credence qualities. In such services, as the perceived risk levels are higher, the importance of communication by the service provider increases. The authors suggest that consumers seek different information provision strategies depending on their knowledge levels. They can influence the consumer purchase intentions to some extent by modulating the marketing communication (Zeithaml, and Bitner, 2000).

7. Effective communication of service benefits: Service marketers face a significant challenge when it comes to communicating the intangible benefits of a service to their target audience (Mattila, 2000). Hence, a specific proposition that has become almost axiomatic in the services literature is that advertising should strive to add tangibility to the service offering (Berry and Clark, 1986; Onkvisit and Shaw, 1989; Stafford, 1996).

Ostensibly, such an effort can help customers mentally grasp a product whose core lacks a physical reality (George and Berry, 1981; Shostack, 1977; Upah, 1983).

8. Role of Corporate Image in marketing communication: A company's image is a function of the attributes of its products. This type of association should often be translated in advertising messages. Today's consumers of services receive communication from a far richer variety of sources like the servicescapes, customer service departments, and everyday service encounter interactions with employees (Zeithaml, and Bitner, 2000). Barich and Kotler have clubbed all these sources as Corporate Image.

9. Role of service provider in marketing communication: Service organizations have a tendency to employ arguments based on contact personnel and physical environment, the hope being that, in the eyes of the consumer, these constitute the benefits promised as a result of the service transaction (Nguyen, and Leblanc 2002). For example, an airline company would emphasize the competence of their flight attendants or seat comfort as service quality indices in a strategy to create a favorable image.

10. Role of IMC in creating brand identity: Another approach to tangibilizing a service is through Integrated Marketing Communication (IMC) (Zeithaml, and Bitner, 2000). Following this approach service companies carefully integrate and organize all the external communication channels. According to P. Griffith Lindell (1997), IMC builds a strong brand identity in the marketplace by tying together and reinforcing all the images and messages given out by the company. Indications of its value suggest that it is perceived as a valuable tool and that nearly two-thirds of consumer product companies employ some form of IMC (Caywood, et al., 1991; Duncan and Everett, 1993).

Conclusions

True communication occurs only when the received or created meaning is that was intended. If the service provider can communicate effectively with the consumer, they can guide consumer expectations and also influence consumer perception of the nature and quality of service. Due to the basic differences between goods and services, majority of marketing literature supports the resulting need to market services differently from goods (Edgett, et al, 1993). The difficulty that consumers experience is that of understanding the service offering (Bateson, 1979). The service provider must help in this process. It is the responsibility of the service provider to present the consumer with a set of relevant references that can be used to form and justify the purchase decision.

The challenge before service marketers is to control or influence those factors that affect actual service quality and also the perceived service quality. This entails a thorough understanding of the consumer needs and expectations for service, tangibilizing the service

offering, dealing with a myriad of people and delivery issues and keeping promises made to customers (Zeithaml Valerie A., Bitner Mary Jo, 2000). A basic issue in bridging the customer gap becomes a strong marketing discourse. Above prerequisites can help the service organisations to better their efforts at service marketing communication.

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