Retail Store Service Quality: Insights from Indian Retail

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ABSTRACT

Services have surpassed other sectors in terms of contributing to the economic growth and enhancing consumers' lifestyle. Retail in particular is touching new horizons by being organised and modernised. Retail structure has undergone tremendous transformation. Retail has found a prominent place in consumers' life by providing them with enriched experiences. However, the inviting retail sector is not left untouched by the powerful environmental forces. As the modern retail opens up possibilities of profit and expansion, it also carries with it the risks associated with management of complex retail operations and the ever-changing customer needs and demands. Researchers and practitioners have identified service quality as a key to gain competitive superiority and sustain effectively in the marketplace. In this background, the present paper seeks to explore the service quality perceptions across demographics in order to understand the differences among the customer segments and thereby uncover crucial service quality parameters for the retailers to empahsize upon.

Keywords: *Retail, Service Quality, Customer Loyalty, Hypermarkets*

INTRODUCTION

Retail has emerged as a dominant sector worldwide. Across the world, retail has subscribed to the improvement in the efficiency of products (Das, 2005). The evolution of retail has been phenomenal by translating the conventional sale and purchase of goods and services to modern and sophisticated retail transactions governed by brands. Not only does the society benefits from organised retail through wholesome shopping experience, informed choice, store atmospherics, trained sales people etc.

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but the economy also grows and develops with the advancement of the retail activities (Gilbert, 2003).

Indian stands among the top scorers with respect to the retail opportunities. Retail in India has tremendous potential that can be explored by both domestic as well as global retailers. Retail market is one of the most powerful markets in India (Ravichandran et al., 2008). The dynamic environmental forces have made the competition intense in the retail sector. Indian retail is currently going through a transitory phase wherein the classical methods of doing business are getting transformed into the organised retail formats. Recent developments in the society such as rising income levels and the changing styles of living have boosted the retail sector. India, being a people rich country is a profitable option and is characterised by demographics in favour of retail growth and thereby economic growth. However, fortune in retail requires the adoption of appropriate plans and policies, with the focus on critical quality issues. As an emerging economy, Indian retailers need to focus on pertinent quality parameters (Mersha et al., 2012).

While on one end, retail seems to be an attractive sector; on the other end, it is equally challenging in light of the dynamic forces acting in the marketplace. Neither a pure good nor a pure service, retail is an amalgamation of goods and services and the innate intricacies of retail makes it hard for the retailers to succeed amidst environmental pressures. The provocative retail environment necessitates the retailers adopt strategies which can extend their stay in the market. Quality is identified as one of the competent retail strategies capable of making the organization sail through the tough conditions surrounding the business. The importance of quality has been confirmed by retail managers as the results of implementing service quality approach are evident in the form of increased market share (Buzzell and Gale, 1987; Philips et al., 1983; Bowen and Hedges, 1993; Siu and Cheung, 2001). Retailers are focussing their efforts on retaining customers by allocating by managerial and other resources towards delivering high levels of service quality. Service quality can help retailers tackle the antagonistic environment characterised by smart customers and smart competitors. Researchers have reached consensus with regards to the contribution of service quality to the retailers in creating customer loyalty (Berry and Gresham, 1986; Hummel and Savitt, 1988; Reichheld and Sasser, 1990). The significance of service quality over and above other organizational elements (Kandampully and Suhartanto, 2000, 2003), has been duly recognised in different service

industries (Sultan and Wong, 2011) as it enables the service organizations achieve multiple objectives simultaneously (Benett and Higgins, 1988; Bolton and Drew, 1991; Boulding et al., 1993; Taylor and Cronin, 1994).

RESEARCH RATIONALE

Satisfied customers make a business grow and service quality grants satisfaction to customers. Gratified customers become a permanent source of revenue for the organization and also widen the customer base of the organization by spreading positive communication about the firm's services. Retailers with the assistance of an influential and commanding force like service quality are able to protect themselves from the competitive risks (Fisk et al., 1993). However, mere understanding of the construct of service quality is insufficient and the retailers must practice this eminent phenomenon in terms of the critical attributes that it is composed of (Reichheld and Sasser, 1990).

Retail research in India needs to be strengthened as modern retail is on the growth path and suitable studies on service quality can provide valuable insights to the retailers. A lot needs to be explored in this area as retailers across the world are working out plans to enter Indian retail. Indian retailers are facing competition from both domestic as well as global retailers. In order to match the global standards in retail, Indian retailers need to investigate the service quality parameters from all possible dimensions. Retail firms should work towards comprehending retail customers' perceptions, evaluate the perceptions periodically and develop quality improvement plans. Retail studies in India are largely based on the scales developed by the western countries (Angur et al., 1999; Sharma and Mehta, 2004; Bhat, 2005, Parikh, 2006, Kaul, 2007). For retail stores to know about their performance on various service quality dimensions, appropriate service quality measures are needed. Thus, there is a need to carry out more comprehensive studies with respect to retail service quality in India and the present study seeks to contribute to the service quality literature to subscribe to the growing retail in India.

RESEARCH OBJECTIVE

The present study addresses both sets of issues- conceptual and methodological. It aims at ascertaining and comparing customers' perceptions of retail service quality in Indian context. The study seeks

to contribute to the marketers and researchers in designing effective and appropriate retailing strategies. Appropriate measures are identified and research is carried out among retail stores and across demographics.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Retailers need contented customers for staying in the race. The secret for a successful business lies in customer's delight (Goncalves, 1998). Quality emerges as a conjuring force in the contentious marketplace. An organization can maintain its current position as well as secure the time ahead with the help of quality. Research on quality was initially limited to the assessment of physical goods, and, services were not deliberated adequately (Wong and Sohal, 2002). With the increasing intensity of competitive forces, service organizations started embracing the quality approach and strived to keep their customers satisfied through application of quality measures. Literature on marketing has been dominated by the service quality construct; the phenomenon being studied and analysed widely including tangible goods, services, industries, relationships, consumers etc. (Gronroos, 1990; Hakansson and Snehota, 1995; Morgan and Hunt, 1994; Kotler, 2000). Within services, the construct of service quality has been extensively researched leading to varying customer conceptions (Svensson, 2006). The research fraternity and the corporate professionals have persistently investigated the quality construct for a long time (Dabholkar et al., 2000) due to its effectiveness in making the organization combat the competition victoriously (Kasper et al., 2000). Quality oriented strategies are reinforced by service firms to fulfill customer expectations (Shemwell et al., 1998) as results reveal inferior service quality to be responsible for the weakening customer base for an organization (Philip and Hazlett, 1997).

The basic nature of services makes its comprehension intricate (Vogt and Fesenmaier, 1995; Tzeng et al., 2002). Gronroos (1984) conceptualized service quality in terms of customers' comparison of expectations and perceptions; the construct being defined from two perspectives: technical and functional. Over time, service quality definitions have focussed on delivering upto customers' expectations. Researchers contend that service quality is the extent to which an organization succeeds in fulfilling the customers' aspirations (Parasuraman et al., 1988; Bolton and Drew, 1991; Cronin and Taylor, 1992; Boulding et al., 1993; Spreng and Mackoy, 1996).

Customer projections about a service assume an important place in the services marketing literature (Lewis, 1989), as the dynamic marketplace observes the emergence of informed and evaluative customers. Companies which desire to earn profits must reach the standards set by the customers being reflected in their expectations. Service quality has been effectively employed by the organizations to differentiate their offerings from competitors and thereby climb the ladder of success (Berry et al., 1988). Customer loyalty is attained by attending to the customers' wants regarding various service quality parameters (Zeithaml, 1996).

Donabedian (1966) instituted the uni-dimensional construct of service quality in 1960s. It was in 1980's that researchers offered the assessment of service quality using multiple items (Lehtinen and Lehtinen, 1982; Gronroos, 1984; Parasuraman et al., 1988). The service quality scale (SERVQUAL) (Parasuraman et al., 1988, 1991) has been one of the conventional instruments for service quality evaluation (Augustyn and Ho, 1998; Robinson, 1999; Heung, 2000). However, a number of researchers disapproved SERVQUAL on account of several theoretical and practical issues (Carman, 1990; Cronin and Taylor, 1992; Babakus and Boller, 1992; Teas, 1993, 1994; Rust and Oliver, 1994; Smith, 1995; Mels et al., 1997; Rao and Kelkar, 1997; Dabholkar et al., 2000). Dabholkar et al., (1996) proposed a service quality scale (RSQS) specifically for the retail sector as SERVQUAL and other measures were found incompetent for assessing retail service quality (Finn and Lamb, 1991; Vandamme and Leunis, 1992; Mehta et al., 2000). Consumers assess service quality both at dimensional and overall level (Dabholkar et al., 2000). A number of researches in retail have utilised RSQS with modifications in order to suit the cultural needs (Boshoff & Terblanche, 1997; Mehta et al., 2000; Siu & Cheung, 2001; Kim & Jin, 2002; Nadiri & Tumer, 2009; Torlak et al., 2010; Martinelli and Balboni, 2012). Adaptation of RSQS would prove useful to Indian retailers for assessing retail customers' perceptions appropriately (Singh and Singh, 2011; Ramakrishnan and Ravindran, 2012).

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

Sample Design

Retail stores in Delhi were surveyed using a questionnaire as the research instrument. These retail store belong to the 'Hypermarket' category, one of the most popular organised retail store format. As opposed to a pure

service setting, a retail store represents a complicated retail environment that offers a mix of merchandise and services as opposed to a pure service setting. The hypermarkets surveyed were Big Bazaar, Vishal Mega Mart and Spencer's.

Research Procedure

The questionnaire was administered to the shoppers at the aforesaid retail stores. However, the retail customers were interviewed before they entered the retail store. The retail customers were sampled on convenience basis. Out of 700 questionnaires, 555 questionnaires could be utilised for analysis (response rate: 79.3%).

Measure: Retail Service Quality

A seven-point Likert scale (1 representing strong disagreement and 7 representing strong agreement) was used for the study. The scale developed by Dabholkar et al. (1996) was modified for the purpose of our study. In agreement with Parikh (2006), the first two items of the "Physical Aspects" dimension were restated as they were generalized statements and lacked specificity. Thereby, item no. 1' "This store has modern looking equipment and fixtures" was restated as "This store has modern looking equipment and fixtures (such as display racks, sales counters)" and item no.2, "The physical facilities at this store are visually appealing" was restated as "The physical facilities at this store are visually appealing (such as building, heating/ air conditioning, lighting, furnishings, entrance and exits, uniformed employees)". Furthermore, item no. 28 of the 'Policy' subdimension, "This store offers its own credit cards" was not included in the study as the retail stores under study do not offer their own credit cards. Finally, "This store offers a wide variety of merchandise" was thought suitable to be a suitable item to be included in the study under the "Policy" dimension.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

This section discusses the survey results concerning the comparison among different categories of respondents through the analysis of data and interpretation.

Table 1 compares the mean and standard deviation values of all the service quality dimensions of all 555 respondents taken together. The

results reveal that the 'Physical Aspects' dimension of service quality scores highest in the mean values showing more positive perceptions of respondents as compared to other dimensions.

Table 1 : Mean and Standard Deviation of Service Quality Dimensions

$(N = 555)$

Service Quality Dimensions	Mean	Standard Deviation
SQ1: Physical Aspects	5.39	0.89
SQ2: Reliability	4.94	1.09
SQ3: Personal Interaction	5.02	0.80
SQ4: Problem Solving	4.68	1.05
SQ5: Policy	5.37	0.80

The second highest mean score is of the dimension 'Policy' followed by 'Personal Interaction', 'Reliability' and lastly 'Problem Solving'. It implies that the retail stores under consideration have paid more attention to the 'Physical Aspects' of the store as compared to other dimensions. Furthermore, problem solving has been the most neglected dimension. Standard deviation values signify no prominent variations between the respondents.

According to Webster (1989), there is a need to examine the demographic characteristics of customers when evaluating service quality in non-professional service such as retailing. Therefore, the demographic data were analysed to examine their association with various dimensions.

While the store Big Bazaar (S1) has highest mean score for the dimension 'Policy', the other two stores: Spencer's (S2) and Vishal Mega Mart (S3) have the highest mean score with respect to the dimension 'Physical aspects'. All the three stores had the lowest mean score with respect to the 'Problem solving' dimension. The figures reveal that S 2 has mean scores high in all the service quality dimensions as compared to S 1 and S 3.

S 1 and S 2 differ in their perceptions with regards to 'Physical Aspects' dimension at 0.05 level of significance. Respondents belonging to the Spencer's store had more positive perceptions about the dimension "Physical Aspects" than Big Bazaar's respondents. In case of the dimension 'Personal Interaction', S 1 & S 2 and S 2 & S 3 differ in their perceptions significantly at 0.05 level. Spencer's store scores highest in the respondents perceptions about the dimension "Personal Interaction"

TABLE 2: Comparison of Service Quality Dimensions Among Three @ Retail Stores –

DUNCAN'S Mean Test

Service Quality Dimensions	S1 (N=188) Mean	S2 (N=175) Mean	S3 (N=192) Mean	S1 V/S S2	S1 V/S S3	S2 V/S S3	F-Value
SQ1: Physical Aspects	5.29	5.48	5.42	*	-	-	2.31
SQ2: Reliability	4.95	5.06	4.83	-	-	-	2.08
SQ3: Personal Interaction	4.94	5.18	4.96	*	-	*	5.41**
SQ4: Problem Solving	4.60	4.72	4.71	-	-	-	0.74
SQ5: Policy	5.43	5.47	5.22	-	*	*	5.65**

* significant at 0.05 level
** significant at 0.01 level
@ retail stores: S1 = Big Bazaar
S2 = Spencer's
S3 = Vishal Mega Mart

than Big Bazaar and Vishal Mega Mart. Under the dimension 'Policy', significant differences were found between S1 & S3 and between S2 & S3 at 0.05 level. Spencer's respondents had highest positive perceptions about the "Policy" dimension than respondents of Big Bazaar and Vishal Mega Mart.

With respect to the mean scores for five service quality dimensions for male and female respondents as shown in Table 3, it can be observed that there are no significant differences between perceptions of male and female respondents with regard to service quality dimensions.

Among the working and non-working respondents, t-values indicate no significant differences between the two groups for all the service quality dimensions.

For comparing the service quality among the three age categories, educational categories and income categories, DUNCAN'S Mean Test has been applied (Table 4).

As clear from the Table 4, among the three age groups: A1, A2 and A3, both the age groups: A1 and A3 have rated the service quality dimensions similarly (1-policy, 2-physical aspects, 3-personal interaction, 4-reliabilty and 5-problem solving). However, with respect to the age group A2, both 'Physical Aspects' and 'Policy' have the equal highest mean score, rest of the rankings being similar to the other two groups. Thereby, through Duncan's mean test, it is found that there are differences in perceptions of three age groups regarding the "Physical Aspects" dimension. These differences are between A1 and A3; A2 and A3 at 0.05 level of significance, indicating that respondents above 35 years of age have highest positive perceptions about the dimension "Physical Aspects" as compared to respondents below 25 years of age and between 25-35 years of age .Further, in the 'Reliability' dimension, differences exist between A1 and A2's perceptions at 0.05 level of significance, i.e. respondents between 25-35 years of age feel more positive about the store's ability to keep promises and do things right.

While comparing the perceptions of three educational categories of respondents: senior secondary, graduates and post graduates (Table 4), it was found that the respondents of categories E2 and E3 had significant differences regarding the "Physical Aspects" dimension of service quality at 0.05 level. Post-graduates respondents perceive "Physical Aspects" dimension more positively than graduate respondents. The mean scores exhibit that the respondents in E1 category favour the 'Policy' dimension the most, E2 category respondents have given highest equal

Table 3: Comparison of service quality dimensions between male /female and working/non-working respondents

Service Quality Dimensions	Total Mean scores	Male (N=333) Mean	Female (N=222) Mean	t-value	Working (N=417) Mean	Non-Working (N=138) Mean	t-value
SQ1 : Physical Aspects	5.39	5.38	5.42	0.46	5.41	5.35	0.63
SQ2: Reliability	4.94	4.96	4.91	0.56	4.99	4.79	1.92
SQ3: Personal Interaction	5.02	4.97	5.09	1.79	5.04	4.97	0.87
SQ4: Problem Solving	4.68	4.66	4.69	0.32	4.69	4.61	0.79
SQ5: Policy	5.37	5.32	5.45	1.83	5.38	5.36	0.23

Table 4: Comparison of service quality dimensions among three age, educational and income @ categories of respondents – DUNCAN'S Mean Test

Service Quality Dimensions	Total Mean scores	A1 Mean	A2 Mean	A3 Mean	A1 V/S A2	A1 V/S A3	A2 V/S A3	F-Value	E1 Mean	E2 Mean	E3 Mean	E1 V/S E2	E1 V/S E3	E2 V/S E3	F-Value	I1 Mean	I2 Mean	I3 Mean	I1 V/S I2	I1 V/S I3	I2 V/S I3	F-Value
SQ1	5.39	5.27	5.35	5.52	-	*	*	3.63*	5.49	5.31	5.53	-	-	*	3.62*	5.33	5.43	5.40	-	-	-	0.55
SQ2	4.94	4.74	5.03	4.96	*	-	-	2.94*	5.01	4.91	4.98	-	-	-	0.40	5.03	4.94	4.88	-	-	-	0.77
SQ3	5.02	4.94	5.06	5.03	-	-	-	0.96	5.02	5.02	5.04	-	-	-	0.44	5.03	5.01	5.04	-	-	-	0.08
SQ4	4.68	4.62	4.76	4.61	-	-	-	1.33	4.54	4.68	4.72	-	-	-	0.68	4.70	4.70	4.63	-	*	-	0.28
SQ5	5.37	5.32	5.35	5.43	-	-	-	0.99	5.50	5.31	5.45	-	-	-	2.73	5.22	5.44	5.40	*	-	-	3.43*

* significant at 0.05 level

@ age categories: A1- respondents below 25 years, A2 – respondents between 25-35 years of age, A3 – respondents of age 35 years and above

@ educational categories: E1-secondary/senior secondary respondents, E2 –graduate respondents, E3 – post-graduate respondents.

@ income categories: I1- respondents earning below Rs1.5 lakh, I2 – respondents earning between Rs 1.5-3 lakh, I3 – respondents earning above 3 lakh

importance to both the dimensions 'Physical Aspects' and 'Policy', while the E3 category respondents have highest positive perceptions about the dimension 'Physical Aspects'. The dimension 'Problem Solving' scored lowest among all the category respondents.

Table 4 also shows the results of comparison of service quality dimensions among the three income categories. It was found that respondents falling under the category I1 had the highest positive perceptions about 'Physical aspects', I2 category respondents favoured the 'Policy' dimension the most, while the I3 category respondents had equal and highest positive perceptions about 'Physical aspects' and 'Policy'. 'Problem Solving' emerged as the service quality dimension with the lowest mean score in all income categories. It was also observed that I1 and I 2 and I1 and I 3 revealed significant differences between themselves for the 'Policy' dimension of service quality at 0.05 level. Respondents earning income between Rs 1.5-3 lakh were more satisfied with the "Policy" dimension of the respective retail stores than respondents earning below Rs. 1.5 lakh and earning above Rs. 3 lakh.

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Service quality has long been the most basic marketing tool for retailers to create competitive advantage. This study demonstrates retail service quality as perceived by different customer groups. The study used survey method to collect information about customers' perceptions about service quality. The findings reported provide some insights for the retailers on how to deliver quality service in a competitive retail environment.

In case of service quality, the respondents had positive perceptions about all the dimensions but they had highest perception about the dimension 'Physical Aspects'. The dimension with the lowest mean score turned out be 'Problem Solving' which implies that the retail stores under study have be more sincere towards solving of customers' problems and have to make their employees more effective in handling customer complaints directly and immediately. Also, the stores should frame an effective procedure for handling returns and exchanges so that the customers do not have to wait a lot to get their goods returned or exchanged and rather they go satisfied with the store and the employees whom they deal with.

While making a comparison of service quality dimensions among the different demographic categories, following observations were made: t-values indicate no significant differences between perceptions of male and female respondents both for service quality dimensions, among the

working and non-working respondents, no significant differences are found using t-test for service quality, by applying DUNCAN'S mean test in order to make a comparison between age, educational, income and store categories, it is found that some of the groups differ significantly on some of the service quality dimensions.

Recommendations

From the retail service quality analysis, many important implications can be outlined. Based upon our survey findings, it was found that the customers of the three stores were satisfied with the appearance of the retail stores and the physical facilities provided thereof. The consumers had high positive perceptions about the store layout, the public areas and the materials associated with the stores. The customers also seemed satisfied and happy with merchandise available at these stores, its operating hours and the payment methods.

However, there are components of service quality too which need to be emphasized by the retail stores under consideration. Thus, the store need to improve on their 'Reliability' aspect by providing its services at the right time and rightly, fulfilling its promises, carrying out error-free sales transactions and ensuring the availability of merchandise according to the needs and wants of the customers. The retail stores also need to work out on the 'Personal Interaction' dimension by training the employees to deal effectively with the customers. The employees should be imparted with all the necessary information to answer customer's questions, the number of employees should be sufficient to respond quickly to customers' requests and the behaviour of the employees should be courteous in the store as well as on the telephone.

Lastly, the customers had lowest positive perceptions about the dimension 'Problem Solving' which implies that the retail stores need to emphasize the most on solving the problems of customers effectively and efficiently. The employee need to be trained in handling the customer complaints directly and immediately, the store should have a clear cut procedure as regards to the returns and exchanges and whenever a customer encounters a problem, the store should show sincere interest in solving it.

LIMITATIONS AND FUTURE RESEARCH

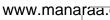The study has been conducted in the hypermarkets in Delhi and NCR

regions and thus the results could not be generalized to other retail store categories. The study could be extended to different retail formats. Also, a comparative analysis can be made between traditional and modern retail. Retail studies could be carried out pan India to help retailers frame effective retail strategies. Further, extending the scope of present research, similarities and differences could be explored in retail in India and abroad. A longitudinal research could reflect how retail has performed in satisfying customers over varying time periods.

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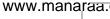
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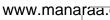
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APPENDIX

Table 1: Characteristics of the Respondents

(N=555)

Characteristics	Number	Percentage
Sex		
-Male	333	60
-Female	222	40
Age		
-Below 25 years	123	22.2
-25-35 years	237	42.7
-35 years and above	195	35.1
Education		
-Senior Secondary	70	12.6
-Graduate	335	60.4
-Post-Graduate	150	27
Occupation		
-Working	417	75.1
-Non-Working	138	24.9
Yearly Family Income		
-Below Rs 1.5 lakh	134	24.1
-Rs 1.5-3 lakh	228	41.1
-Above 3 lakh	193	34.8