MEASURING RETAIL STORE SERVICE QUALITY: THE DISPARITY BETWEEN THE RETAIL SERVICE QUALITY SCALE (RSQS) AND COMMENT CARDS

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ABSTRACT

Comment cards are often used by retail stores to assess service quality at the point of service. This study compares the attributes and dimensions measured by retail store comment cards to the attributes, sub-dimensions and dimensions of the Retail Service Quality Scales (RSQS) recommended by Dabholkar et al. (1996). A content analysis of retail store comment cards reveals that all five of the RSQS dimensions are being measured in the retail industry, although with different attributes. Findings reveal that the comment cards do not include two RSQS sub-dimensions, convenience (physical aspect) and promises (reliability), and eighteen of the RSQS scale items. Further, comment cards measure attributes that are not captured by RSQS, including the friendliness and professionalism of the sales staff, check-out, delivery, loading and availability of service, price, selection, value, condition, usability, styling and preference of the product, and the location of the store facilities. As retail stores transition to electronic capture of service quality data, the study findings are equally relevant to electronic survey construction.

INTRODUCTION

Retail is struggling as it slowly recovers from low sales in 2013. After a disappointing year, retailers offered aggressive promotions for the 2013 holiday season in the hope of increasing sales. Sales did increase, but at the expense of their margin. A large share of sales was lost to Wal-Mart and online to Amazon.com (Wolf, 2014). Although retail sales are expected to grow 4.1 percent this year (Karr, 2014), "(r)etailers are still stressed and a long-term promotional environment may actually hurt the bottom line." (Wolf, 2014, p. 4). Continued aggressive promotion is not in the best interest of retail. Rather, the retail store must find a way to differentiate itself so it can stand apart from other retailers and drive more consumers to its store. Distinguished service quality is one way to accomplish this. Retailers need an efficient way to assess the service quality of their store. This is often accomplished with comment cards or surveys designed by or for the store. The academic literature is replete with suggestions for measuring service quality. Do retailers take advantage of this treasure trove?

RELATED LITERATURE

Service quality is an antecedent to customer satisfaction that, in turn, impacts purchase intention (Cronin and Taylor, 1996). Thus, retail store managers are keenly interested in assessing and addressing service quality issues efficiently and effectively.

Service Quality Scales

Parasuraman et al. (1988) created a multiple-item scale to measure consumer perceptions of service quality that they named SERVQUAL. This 22-item instrument is based on gap theory that measures the difference between customer expectation and their perception of actual service performance on a seven-point Likert scale ranging from strongly agree to strongly disagree. The researchers identified five dimensions of service quality, including tangibles, reliability, responsiveness, assurance and empathy. The physical attributes are captured by tangibles. Reliability is the ability to perform dependably and accurately. Responsiveness ties into willingness to help and promptness of service. Assurance is the ability of the employee to engender trust and confidence from the customer. Empathy is providing caring, individualized attention. Parasuraman et al. (1988) suggest that SERVQUAL can be used across a broad spectrum of services, but may need to be adapted to the particular organization.

Cronin and Taylor (1992) suggest that service quality should be measured as an attitude instead of using gap theory. They recommend a simple performance-only based attitudinal measure, SERVPERF, as a better fit with the literature and their empirical results. SERVPERF omits the expectation measures in SERVQUAL and uses only the performance measures. In comparing the two, using customers of fast food restaurants in Delhi, Jain and Gupta (2004) reported SERVPERF to have more convergent and discriminate validity, but SERVQUAL has higher diagnostic power to help managers with practical decision-making. They also note that the heavier data collection task related to SERVQUAL may limit its use. Angur et al. (1999) compared the scales, both weighted and non-weighted, in the Indian banking industry and also concluded SERVQUAL to be a better measure of service quality.

Industry-Specific Service Quality Scales

Researchers have investigated the adaptations to measuring service quality that may be needed depending upon the specific industries (e.g., Bowers et al. (1994) in health care, Stafford (1996) in banking, Weeks et al. (1996) for professional services, Oyewole (1999) for fast food, and Chan et al. (2011) in leisure services). Knutson et al. (1990) created LODGSERV for the lodging industry based on the five dimensions of the SERVQUAL instrument, but made up of twenty-six lodging-specific items. DINESERV was developed in the same way, but for the restaurant industry with twenty-nine restaurant industry-specific items. A performance-only version, DINESERV.PER, is similar to SERVPERF (Stevens et al., 1995) but for use in the restaurant industry.

Retail Service Quality Scales (RSQS)

Although Parasuraman et al. (1988) suggest that the SERVQUAL instrument can be adapted to the organization, Dabholkar et al. (1996) view SERVQUAL as more appropriate for "pure" service settings and not as applicable to the retail setting which they believe requires additional dimensions. The researchers site others with the same viewpoint. Carman (1990) does not view the SERVQUAL dimensions as generic and recommends additional items or factors based on the setting. Finn and Lamb (1991) also see the need for modification for SERVQUAL to be valid in a retail environment. Thus, Dabholkar et al. (1996) propose the Retail Service Quality Scale (RSQS), a 28-item scale with seventeen items from SERVQUAL and eleven items from the literature and their own qualitative research. Since customers evaluate retail quality at both the attribute and integrated level, the RSQS has five dimensions each with its own sub-dimensions (see Table 1). The five dimensions include *physical aspects*, *reliability*, *personal interaction*, *problem solving*, and *policy*. *Physical aspects* is a little broader than the SERVQUAL *tangibles* dimension, as it includes the appearance and convenience of the store's layout. *Reliability* is similar to the SERVQUAL *reliability*, but with two sub-dimensions involving keeping *promises* and *doing it right*. *Personal interaction* with employees encompasses *inspiring confidence* and *courteousness/helpfulness*. *Problem solving* handles *returns/exchanges* and *complaints*. *Policy* is related to the advantages offered to customers via the store policy (i.e., hours of operation, store credit).

Table 1			
Retail Service Quality Scale Dimensions, Sub-Dimensions and Items			
RETAIL SERVICE QUALITY SCALE DIMENSION	**RETAIL SERVICE QUALITY SCALE SUB-DIMENSION**		**RETAIL SERVICE QUALITY SCALE ITEM**
Physical Aspects	Appearance	P1	This store has modern-looking equipment and fixtures.
Physical Aspects	Appearance	P2	The physical facilities at this store are visually appealing.
Physical Aspects	Appearance	P3	Materials associated with this store's service (such as shopping bags, catalogs, or statements) are visually appealing.
Physical Aspects	Appearance	P4	This store has clean, attractive, and convenient public areas (restrooms, fitting rooms)
Physical Aspects	Convenience	P5	The store layout at this store makes it easy for customers to find what they need.
Physical Aspects	Convenience	P6	The store layout at this store makes it easy for customers to move around in the store.
Reliability	Promises	P7	When this store promises to do something by a certain time, it will do so.
Reliability	Promises	P8	This store provides its services at the time it promises to do so.
Reliability	Doing it Right	P9	This store performs the service right the first time.
Reliability	Doing it Right	P10	This store has merchandise available when the customers want it.
Reliability	Doing it Right	P11	This store insists on error-free sales transactions and records.
Personal Interaction	Inspiring Confidence	P12	Employees at this store have the knowledge to answer customers' questions.
Personal Interaction	Inspiring Confidence	P13	The behavior of employees in this store instill confidence in customers.
Personal Interaction	Inspiring Confidence	P14	Customers feel safe in their transactions with this store.
Personal Interaction	Courteousness/ Helpfulness	P15	Employees in this store give prompt service to customers.
Personal Interaction	Courteousness/ Helpfulness	P16	Employees in this store tell customers exactly when services will be performed.

RETAIL SERVICE QUALITY SCALE DIMENSION	RETAIL SERVICE QUALITY SCALE SUB-DIMENSION		RETAIL SERVICE QUALITY SCALE ITEM
Personal Interaction	Courteousness/ Helpfulness	P17	Employees in this store are never too busy to respond to customer's requests.
Personal Interaction	Courteousness/ Helpfulness	P18	This store gives customers individual attention.
Personal Interaction	Courteousness/ Helpfulness	P19	Employees in this store are consistently courteous with customers.
Personal Interaction	Courteousness/ Helpfulness	P20	Employees of this store treat customers courteously on the telephone.
Problem Solving	None	P21	This store willingly handles returns and exchanges.
Problem Solving	None	P22	When a customer has a problem, this store shows a sincere interest in solving it.
Problem Solving	None	P23	Employees of this store are able to handle customer complaints directly and immediately.
Policy	None	P24	This store offers high quality merchandise.
Policy	None	P25	This store provides plenty of convenient parking for its customers.
Policy	None	P26	This store has operating hours convenient to all their customers.
Policy	None	P27	This store accepts most major credit cards.
Policy	None	P28	This store offers its own credit card.

In a comparison study of SERVPERF and RSQS in the Singapore retail industry, Mehta et al. (2000) found the RSQS to be better suited to businesses in which there is a higher ratio of goods to service (i.e., a supermarket), whereas the SERVPERF scale is better suited to businesses with the opposite ratio in which service is more important (i.e., an electronic goods retailer).

HYPOTHESES

Comment cards are designed to capture the customers' evaluations of the performance of the retail store at the time of service or shortly thereafter, so it is a useful tool for measuring service quality. However, comment cards are not always used to their full potential, and often as customer appeasement or employee punishment (Wisney and Corney, 1997). There is also the challenge of comment card availability and problematic return methods that impact data collection.

Managers have many service quality instruments at their disposal. Specifically, managers in a retail setting have the RSQS available to them. However, managers do not always use the established scales or only use a portion of the items recommended by the academic literature. In comparing comment cards to the LODGSERV instrument, Keith and Simmers (2013) found that all dimensions were included by at least one measure, however some items were not included and others were added in the comment cards. The DINESERV and comment card comparison faired the same, by including all five DINESERV dimensions with at least one measure, but including additional tangible attributes and omitting items that may suggest a negative experience (Keith and Simmers, 2011).

Therefore it is hypothesized, that all five of the RSQS dimensions will be represented. However, not all prescribed items will be utilized and there may be some additional items included by the comment cards.

H1   Retail store comment cards assess all five Retail Service Quality Scale dimensions.

H2   Retail store comment cards do not assess service quality using the same items as those of the Retail Service Quality Scale.

METHODOLOGY

A sample of sixty comment cards was collected from diverse retail stores throughout the United States over a four-year time period. The individual comment card items were sorted by similarities and differences, then categorized into meaningful dimensions. The comment card items and identified dimensions were compared to the items, sub-dimensions and dimensions of the Retail Service Quality Scale (RSQS) scale developed by Dabholkar, Thorpe and Rentz (1996). Two coders separately categorized the data then compared their results. Inter-coder reliability was found to be 99 percent, with coders resolving the differences found.

RESULTS

The types of questions found in the sample comment cards included Likert scale, categorical, binomial and open-ended questions. The average length of the comment cards was ten questions with a median of nine and a range from three to forty-eight questions. Most surveys (n = 45, 75%) were postage-paid by the retail store. In eighteen percent of the surveys (n = 11), the respondent could check for a possible reply to a complaint. Almost all of the surveys had a place for additional comments. The demographic characteristics requested included name (n = 54, 90%), address (n = 48, 80%) and telephone number (n = 44, 73%). Only a couple of surveys (3%) asked for more detailed information. An overall experience question was asked in 47 percent of the surveys using a 4- or 5-point Likert scale.

Retail Store Comment Card Analysis

A total of four meaningful dimensions were identified with the comment cards. These four dimensions assessed the *sales staff*, *service*, *product* and *store facilities* (See Table 2). Distinguishable attributes were identified for each dimension. The most frequently used assessment was a 4- or 5-point Likert scale.

The attributes used to assess the *sales staff* included *helpfulness*, *friendliness*, *promptness*, *knowledge*, *courtesy*, *efficiency*, *appearance*, *accuracy* and *professionalism*. The most frequently addressed attributes were *helpfulness*, *friendliness*, *promptness*, *knowledge* and *courtesy*, each found in more than 30 percent of the surveys. Attributes used to rate the *service* received at a particular retail store included *checkout*, *delivery*, *loading*, *refund/exchange* and *availability of service*. *Checkout* was in 30 percent of the surveys. The other attributes were in 8-10 percent of the surveys. Nine attributes were used to measure the retail *product(s)* sold, including *price*, *selection*, *quality*, *in/out of stock*, *value*, *condition*, *usability*, *styling* and *preference*. *Price*, *selection* and *quality* assessments were each found in approximately one-third of the surveys. The *store facilities* were judged based on *cleanliness* (27%), *attractiveness* (17%) and *store location* (8%).

COMMENT CARDS				RETAIL SERVICE QUALITY SCALE		
Dimension	Attribute	Frequency (n=60)	Percent	Dimension	Sub-Dimension	Item #
Sales Staff	Helpfulness	38	63%	Personal Interaction	Courteousness/ Helpfulness	None
	Friendliness	30	50%	None	None	None
	Promptness	26	43%	Personal Interaction	Courteousness/ Helpfulness	P15
	Knowledge	24	40%	Personal Interaction	Inspiring Confidence	P12
	Courtesy	19	32%	Personal Interaction	Courteousness/ Helpfulness	P19, P20
	Efficiency	12	20%	Reliability	Doing It Right	None
				Problem Solving	None	None
	Appearance	8	13%	Physical Aspects	Appearance	None
	Accuracy	6	10%	Reliability	Doing It Right	P11
	Professionalism	4	7%	None	None	None
Service	Check-out	18	30%	None	None	None
	Delivery	6	10%	None	None	None
	Loading	5	8%	None	None	None
	Refund/Exchange	5	8%	Problem Solving	None	P21
	Availability	5	8%	None	None	None
Product	Price	22	37%	None	None	None
	Selection	21	35%	None	None	None
	Quality	20	33%	Policy	None	P24
	In/Out of Stock	15	25%	Reliability	Doing It Right	P10
	Value	9	15%	None	None	None
	Condition	6	10%	None	None	None
	Usability	5	8%	None	None	None
	Styling	4	7%	None	None	None
	Preference	4	7%	None	None	None
Store Facilities	Cleanliness	16	27%	Physical Aspects	Appearance	P4
	Attractiveness	10	17%	Physical Aspects	Appearance	P2
	Location	5	8%	None	None	None

Table 2
Retail Store Comment Card Content Analysis vs. Retail Service Quality Scale

Retail Store Comment Card Content vs. RSQS Dimensions

The dimensions and attributes of the comment cards were compared to the dimensions, sub-dimensions and items of the RSQS. The comment cards included each RSQS dimension with one or more RSQS item(s) in support of H1, but did not include two of the sub-dimensions (*convenience* and *promises*). Only ten of the twenty-eight RSQS items were directly related to the comment cards.

The comment card dimension of *sales staff* was captured in the RSQS *personal interaction* dimension, *courteousness/helpfulness* sub-dimension, but no specific RSQS items corresponded. *Promptness* corresponded to the RSQS *personal interaction* dimension, *courteousness/helpfulness* sub-dimension, with item P15. Item P12 in the *personal interaction* dimension, *inspiring confidence* sub-dimension captured *knowledge*. *Courtesy* was measured using two of the *personal interaction* dimension, *courteousness/helpfulness* sub-dimension items P19 and P20. *Efficiency* corresponded to both the *reliability* dimension, *doing it right* sub-dimension, and the *problem solving* dimension, although not with a specific RSQS item.

Appearance corresponds directly to the *physical aspects* dimension, *appearance* sub-dimension, though not with a specific item. The *reliability* dimension, *doing it right* sub-dimension, item P11 captures *accuracy*. *Sales staff friendliness* and *professionalism* was not captured by RSQS.

The only comment card attribute under the dimension of *service* that RSQS captured was *refund/exchange* with the *problem solving* dimension, item P21. *Check-out*, *delivery*, *loading*, and *availability* were not captured by RSQS.

Two RSQS items measured the comment card *product* dimension. The comment card attribute *quality* was measured by the *policy* dimension, item P24. *In/out of stock* was measured by the *reliability* dimension, *doing it right* sub-dimension, with item P10. The attributes of *price*, *selection*, *value*, *condition*, *usability*, *styling* and *preference* were not captured by RSQS.

Two attributes of the comment card *store facilities* dimension were captured by RSQS. *Cleanliness* and *attractiveness* were captured by the *physical aspects* dimension, *appearance* sub-dimension, with items P4 and P2, respectively. The *location* attribute was not captured by RSQS. These results support H2.

CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The RSQS is specifically designed to measure service quality in a retail setting. As hypothesized, all five RSQS dimensions were represented. However while the comment cards do touch on each of the identified dimensions, they do not include all of the RSQS sub-dimensions or scale items. In addition, they include many attributes that are not captured by the RSQS instrument, specifically those related to the product itself and the handling of the product. This is similar to the findings of Keith and Simmers (2011, 2013) in the restaurant and lodging industries.

Comment cards have the advantage of being standardized and able to capture information at the time of service. Over time responses can be compared and appropriate remedies can be taken when necessary (Sampson, 1996). However, comment cards have the disadvantage of having a limited space, so retailers must be selective with the types of information they collect. Including open-ended questions allows the respondent to provide a deeper understanding of customer expectations (Pullman et al., 2005). Just having customers complete a comment card shows retailer concern and generates customer elaboration so as to have a positive effect on customer behavior, such as purchase frequency and the amount of money spent at a visit to the store (Borle et al., 2007). The feedback received from comment cards help to improve service quality, customer satisfaction and purchase intention (Cronin and Taylor, 1992).

The recent trend is for companies to transition to electronic means of collecting service quality information. Findings from this study are also applicable in this medium as the same data will need to be collected regardless of the collection methodology. Researchers need to be cognizant of the dimensions and items that are included beyond those recommended by the RSQS academic literature. Future research may examine if researchers are designing their electronic surveys to be similar to their former comment cards. Of further interest may be to examine if researchers are able to capture service quality data closer to the time of service, if

there is a difference in the response rate and if there is a divergence among the people who respond to paper versus electronic survey formats.

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