The rebirth of the SERVQUAL gaps model in service design

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1   Case background

The service design field is evolving quick and constantly looking to developing new methods.

One particular challenge is how to connect with the many business functions involved in delivering, such as marketing, HRM and operations.

In this workshop we will (re)introduce the SERVQUAL framework to the service design community as a way to contribute to solving this challenge.

SERVQUAL is a product from service marketing and was developed in the eighties by Parasuraman, Zeithaml and Berry. (Parasuraman et al., 1985, 1988

It consists of 1) a conceptual model: the SERVQUAL gaps model and 2) A multi-dimensional questionnaire, based on that model.

1) The conceptual gaps model

The model (Parasuraman et al., 1985; Curry, 1999; Luk and Layton, 2002) defines service quality as the discrepancy between customer expectations and their perceptions of the service delivered. This is labeled gap 5 in the model.

Next to this, the model identifies six more gaps associated with service delivery to customers.

Gap1: Customers' expectations versus management perceptions

Gap2: Management perceptions versus service specifications.

Gap3: Service specifications versus service delivery:

Gap4: Service delivery versus external communication:

Gap6: The discrepancy between customer expectations and employees' perceptions.

Gap7: The discrepancy between employee's perceptions and management perceptions.

2) multi-dimensional questionnaire,

Through factor analysis the SERVQUAL authors identified 10 factors that influence service quality. These were later reduced to 5. They have been popularised thorough the mnemonic aid as the 'RATER factors':

- Responsiveness - willingness to help and respond to customer need
- Assurance - ability of staff to inspire confidence and trust
- Tangibles - physical facilities, equipment, staff appearance, etc.
- Empathy - the extent to which caring individualized service is given
- Reliability - ability to perform service dependably and accurately

SERVQUAL has been extensively studied and has gained popularity with practitioners in many industries, ranging from healthcare and hotels to banking and e-business.

It has undergone heavy critique concerning the dimensionality and insufficient psychometric properties of the scale (Asubonteng, P., et al. (1996),

Buttle, F. (1996))

We argue that for service designers not the measurement tool, but the conceptual model is especially useful for framing service design work, because according to Brown and Bond (1995), "the gap model is one of the best received and most heuristically valuable contributions to the services literature".

Drawing from different cases (oa from the food industry and health-insurance) we demonstrate how:

1. The model draws attention to the role of multiple stakeholders in service

2. Gap1, which is sometimes called the 'Listening Gap', is the conceptual reason of the success of qualitative and etnographic research is service design.

3. Gap2 represents the core of the discipline of service design.

4. Gap4 is a valuable source of design challenges: What (over)promises are made in advertising that need to be matched by a adequate service design.

5. related to Gap6; How this misunderstanding gap can be closed through the co-creative service design process.

6. Gaps 3 and 7: represent the human resources and change management challenges for service designs.

2 Take home

Although few service designer believe they work in isolation, the case studies and gap model presentation will clarify the reach of their work and how they can draw from other services practices to improve their work and impact.

Knowledge of this classic and widely adopted model will help designers better represent the value of their process, tools and their work with other service related disciplines.

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