

AN INVESTIGATION OF THE RELATIONSHIPS AMONG SERVICE QUALITY, CUSTOMER SATISFACTION, CUSTOMER LOYALTY, AND WORD-OF-MOUTH COMMUNICATION IN A RETAIL STORE IN CHACHOENGSAO PROVINCE, THAILAND.

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Received June 2006; accepted August 2006.

ABSTRACT

The retail trade in Thailand is undoubtedly one of the most important economic sectors. In response to the increasingly competitive marketplace, retailers are continually seeking strategies to insulate and increase profit. The emphasis on service quality is argued to be direct outcome of a market orientation and a search for competitive advantage.

Nowadays, the number of convenience stores is increasing. Seven-Eleven is clearly the leader in this sector. Consequently, this research utilizes Seven-Eleven as a case study to explore company's service quality. With this in mind, this research is designed to investigate the relationships among service quality, customer satisfaction, customer loyalty, and word-of-mouth communication. The findings of this study will benefit retail business owners and academics by providing them with new knowledge helping to understand, explain, and possibly predict the relationships among these constructs. In addition, with the application of this knowledge, business owners will improve their performance resulting in gaining more sustainable incomes and profits.

This research employed survey method conducted in Chachoengsao province, Thailand using Seven-Eleven Buddha Sothorn as the research site. The hypotheses were tested by means of the Pearson Product-moment coefficient of correlation.

The research results indicate that service quality has a positive relationship with customers' satisfaction, customers' loyalty, and word-of-mouth communication. Also, the results demonstrate that each element of service quality has different relationship with customers' satisfaction, customers' loyalty and word-of-mouth communication. Therefore, it can be concluded that good service quality ensures satisfaction, establishes loyalty tendencies in customers which result in the development of customer advocacy, and finally leads to positive word-of-mouth communication.

Keywords: Service quality, customer satisfaction, customer loyalty, and word-of-mouth communication.

INTRODUCTION

After undergoing the period of economic crisis in 1997, Thailand's economy has been heavily shaped in form of trade in that it has been shifted from independent retailers to the modern operation. Within the retail sector, convenience stores play an outstanding role as shown in Table 1. The numbers of convenience stores in Thailand in 2001 and between 1993 and 2001 increased from 9.9 percent to 12.4 percent (Thailand Development Research Institute, 2002).

Table 1. The numbers of convenience stores in Thailand in 2001.

Rank	Name	Total branch
1	Seven-Eleven	1,721
2	AM-PM	500
3	Family Mart	174

Source: Siam Future Development (2001).

These convenience stores are now using innovative technology and modern equipment. Among them, Seven-Elevens are clearly the leader in this sub-sector based on three fundamental factors: convenient location, convenient service, and convenient shopping (Siam Future Development, 2001).

In response to the increasingly competitive marketplace, retailers are continually seeking strategies to insulate and increase profit by using a market orientation as the best strategy to achieve customer satisfaction and a financial gain over competitors. Emphasis on service quality is argued to be the direct outcome of a market orientation and the search for competitive advantage (Hunt and Morgan, 1995). A successful strategy utilizing a market-based quality orientation will lead to the development of the unique organizational capacity and resource utilization (Bharadwaj et al., 1993).

To understand the importance of service quality, this research was conducted to investigate the relationships between service quality, customers' satisfaction that may lead to customers' loyalty and

word-of-mouth communication. The benefits of this study will show the value of service to customers. Additionally, retailers can use service quality to assess whether or not they are meeting customer satisfaction. By assessing service quality, a retailer can identify areas of differences and determine in which service areas they are weak and which area needs to gain more attention. This enables a retailer to emphasize essentially obvious changes.

The literature review is consisting of four parts including service quality, customers' satisfaction, customers' loyalty, and word-of-mouth communication, respectively.

Service quality

Researchers have differentiated between services and goods. Services have been defined as being activities, benefits, or satisfactions that are offered for sale. Service has four characteristics that distinguish them from goods (Zikmund and D'Amico, 1993). The four characteristics are intangible, heterogeneous, perishable and inseparable.

Intangible means services are performance that cannot be seen, felt, tasted, or touched before an exchange agreement is concluded (Zeithaml et al., 1988). Heterogeneous is a great variability among service provided (Zikmund and D'Amico, 1993). Perishable means service cannot be stored or reserved for the next use (Zeithaml et al., 1988). Inseparable means services involve simultaneous production and consumption, which is different from the usual sequence of events in an exchange situation. There is no pre-produced quality to control in advance before the service is sold and consumed (Gronroos, 1990).

Quality is determined by customers based on what is important to them, service quality is described as a form of attitude relating but not being equivalent to satisfaction that results from the comparison between expectations and performance (Bolton and Drew, 1991).

In retail stores, retailers are challenged to

differentiate themselves from others to meet the needs of their customers by providing high quality service that requires more from customers in the manner that customers' negotiate their way through the store, finding merchandises they want, interact with several store personnel, and returning merchandises (Dabholkar et al., 1996).

Dabholkar et al., (1996) have classified service quality into five dimensional levels and three sub-dimensional levels.

First, physical aspects which are physical facilities, equipment used by service providers, and the appearance of the service personnel. Physical aspects are classified into two sub-dimensions which are: (1) appearance refers to the firm's physical evidence. Dabholkar et al. (1996) have pointed out that differentiation can also be achieved by using physical evidence to reposition the service firm in the eyes of its customers, i.e., well dressed, neat people, appealing promotional materials, and modern looking equipment, (2) for convenience, Dabholkar et al. (1996) have found that the cleanliness of a retail store, the general appearance of a retail store, and the appearance of public facilities are important to customers when discussing physical evidence that is utilized to evaluate service quality. For example, the physical facilities in the shop are visually appealing, the shop layout make easy for customers to find goods that they need, the available merchandise when customers need.

Second, reliability relates to service offered by the store which includes keeping promise or correctly performing right services (Dabholkar et al., 1996). Reliability involves two sub-dimensional levels: keeping the promises and doing it right. Keeping the promises mean the trustworthiness of a retail store, assurance of timely service. Doing it right means when the shop insists on error-free sale transactions and records.

Third, personal interaction consists of two sub-dimensions which are close relation and quality of service delivery from employees to customers (Dabholkar et al, 1996). The two dimensions include: (1) inspiring confidence, and

(2) being courteous and helpful. For inspiring confidence, the employees will have to have the knowledge to answer customer questions; and for being courteous and helpful, employees will have to have enthusiasm to help customers and inclination to give customers personal attention, as well as to give efficient and prompt service.

Fourth, problem solving especially when customers return or exchange purchases, and lodge complaints. For example, employees handle returns and exchanges willingly; when the customers have problems, the retailer shows a sincere interest in solving; employees are able to handle customer complaints directly and immediately.

Fifth, policy includes the quality of merchandise, convenience of parking, operating hours, and credit card usage. For example, the shop offers high quality merchandises, the shop provides plenty of convenience parking for customers, and the shop has operating hours convenient to all their customers.

Customer satisfaction

Customer satisfaction refers to a response that pertains to a particular focus such as a purchase experience and/or an associated product which occurs at a certain time during post-purchase and post-consumption (Giese and Cate, 1999). For either case, Oliver (1987) has maintained that consumers want to be satisfied. They generally think of satisfaction as a goal achieved from purchased and used products or services, whereas Reynold and Beatty (1999) have found that customers' perception of benefits positively affects satisfaction with the salesperson and that customers' satisfaction can predict a good purchase behaviors in the future. Above all, Hallowell (1996) has found that customer satisfaction can be linked to profitability and customer loyalty.

Customer loyalty

Dick and Basu (1994) define loyalty as the relationship between the relative attitude towards an entity such as brand, product or service. Loyalty involves a psychological bond to the seller and

requires a high degree of customers' satisfaction and commitment. For supplier, it is generally believed that the ultimate goal of obtaining customers' satisfaction is to achieve customers' loyalty (Rust et al., 1995; Ziethaml et al., 1990; Reynold and Beatty, 1999). Finally, Reynold and Arnold (2000) conducted a research on the relationship among customers' satisfaction, customers' loyalty, and word-of-mouth communication, and showed that satisfaction has a positive effect on loyalty to the salesperson and that satisfaction affects word-of-mouth.

Word-of-mouth communication

Arndt (1967) defines word-of-mouth as an informal conversation by which opinions on products and brands are developed, expressed, and spread. Word-of-mouth derives from consumers' attitude and behavioral tendencies (Mangoid et al., 1999).

It has been found that customers who are

satisfied with certain products or services would generally recommend those products and services to others (Dick and Basu, 1994). Beatty et al. (1996) have also insisted that satisfied retail customers frequently engage in positive word-of-mouth advertising for the retailer with whom they are satisfied. Moreover, Griffin (1995) has stated that ensuring satisfaction and attempting to establish loyalty tendencies in customers result in the development of customers' advocacy.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This research was conducted to explore the relationships among service quality, customer's satisfaction, loyalty, and word-of-mouth communication in a retail store. The research question to be addressed was "How does service quality relate to customer's satisfaction, customer's loyalty, and word-of-mouth communication?" The hypotheses and structural model were developed based on the review of existing literature (Figure 1).

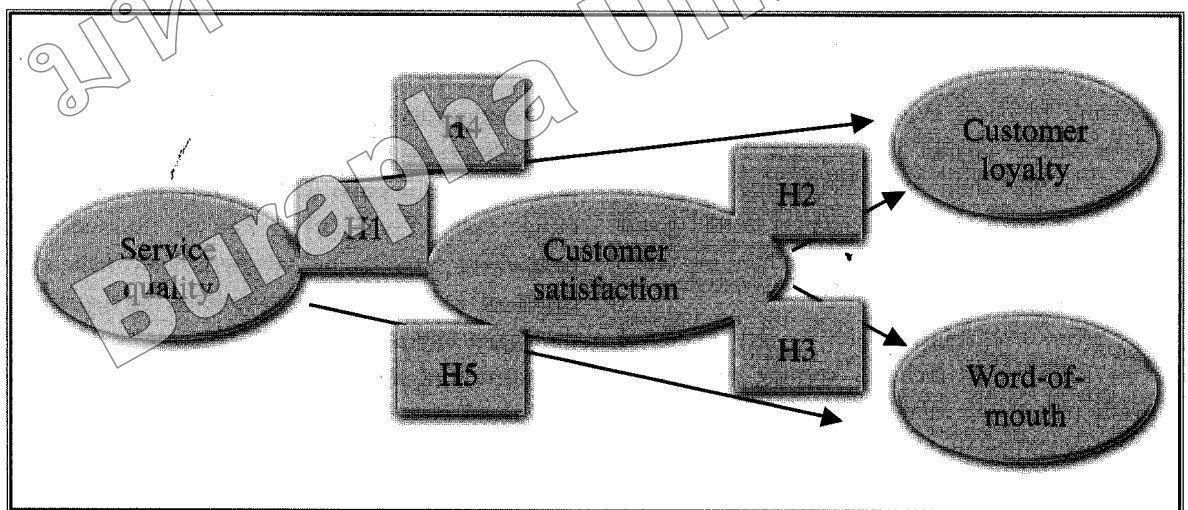


Figure 1. Showing structural equation model.

Hypothesis 1: The service quality has a positive relationship with customer satisfaction to the store.

Hypothesis 2: Customer satisfaction has a positive association with the customer loyalty to the store.

Hypothesis 3: Customer satisfaction has a positive association with word-of-mouth to the store.

Hypothesis 4: The service quality has a positive relationship with the customers' attitudinal loyalty to the store.

Hypothesis 5: The service quality has a positive relationship with the consumers' word-of-mouth communication behavior towards the store.

Research design

This research adopted a survey method. Respondents were asked a variety of questions regarding their behaviors, attitudes, and demographic characteristics. Then, Likert scale was used to measure informants' attitude toward service quality, customer satisfaction, customer loyalty, and word-of-mouth communication. The questionnaire was structured following work of Dabholkar et al. (1996). In attempt to achieve an optimal picture of the loyalty construct, the questionnaire was constructed based on Reynolds and Beatty's study (1999). Finally, to measure word-of-mouth communication, the questionnaire was adopted from Harrison-Walker's work (2001).

This study was conducted in Chachoengsao province, Thailand. Seven-Eleven Buddha Sothorn was selected as a study unit owing to the fact that this store won the first prize of service quality in 2003 from CP Seven-Eleven Company Limited. Three hundred informant respondents participated in this study. The respondents were asked to complete the questionnaire and return the questionnaire to the researchers at the cashier counter.

Data analysis were first analyzed using descriptive statistics for frequency distribution and mean from five ranging scales, i.e., 1.00-1.50 = strongly dissatisfaction, 1.51-2.50 = dissatisfaction, 2.51-3.50 = uncertain, 3.51-4.50 = agree, and 4.51-5.00 = strongly agree.

Thereafter, the product-moment coefficient of correlation was used to find out the relationships and to prove the hypotheses.

RESULTS

The finding indicated that the majority of respondents who shopped at Seven-Eleven Buddha Sothorn was female, about 60%, with the age ranging from 15-29 years old, and their level of education below bachelor degree, about 78%. Approximately, 28.3% were business owner, 24% were students, and 20.7% were government officer. The household monthly incomes of most respondents (35%) ranged from 5,001-10,000 baht.

Generally, respondents shopped at Seven-Eleven Buddha Sothorn three times a week. Seven-Eleven Buddha Sothorn had many loyalty customers: 6.7 % of respondents visited the shop less than one time a week, and 93.3 % of respondents shopped at the store at least one time a week.

Regarding the attitude of respondents toward service quality in six aspects, the results revealed that appearance was the most important, with the mean of 3.96. The means of reliability, convenience, personal interaction, policy, and problem solving were 3.94, 3.88, 3.86, 3.71, and 3.68, respectively. The means of element of sub dimension were as follows:

Appearance: Modern looking equipment, with the mean of 4.00, which was higher than that of neat or well-dressed staff, which was 3.85.

Convenience: Easy-to-move-around the shop layout, with the mean of 3.98, which was higher than those of the visually appeal of physical facilities and the availabilities of merchandises when customers needed, which were 3.90 and 3.76, respectively.

Reliability: The insistence of the shop on error-free sales, transactions, and records, with the mean of 4.06; whereas the mean of the trustworthiness of a retailed store, assurance of timely service was 3.81.

Personal interaction: The means of knowledge of employees, prompt service, and courteous were 3.96, 3.87, and 3.59, respectively.

Problem solving: The ability of employees to handle customers' complaints, with the mean of 3.62, which was higher than those of the ability of employees to solve problems (3.61) and of the willingness of employees to handle returns and exchanges of goods (3.58).

Policy: The means of quality of merchandise, convenience operating hour, and convenience parking were 3.82, 3.80, and 3.52, respectively.

The overall mean of degree of customer satisfaction in the store was 3.72, while those of

degree of customer loyalty and of degree of word-of-mouth communication were 3.85 and 3.62, respectively. This means that the respondents agree and satisfy with the shopping. In addition, the respondents agree that once they find a store that they like, they stick with it, and they always mention good things about the store to others.

To test the hypotheses, the functional relationships of each element and the strength of the linear relationships were analyzed by means of the Pearson product-moment correlation coefficient. The results are shown below, as follows:

Hypothesis 1: The service quality exhibited a positive relationship with customer satisfaction to the store. Service quality rendered a positive relationship with customer satisfaction to the store at a statistical significance level of 0.01 with the value of correlation coefficient of 0.335. Some sub-elements of service quality showed a positive correlation with customer satisfaction to the store as shown in Table 2.

Table 2. The values of correlation coefficient of sub-elements of service quality analyzed by means of the Pearson product-moment correlation coefficient.

Sub-elements of service quality	Value of correlation coefficient
1. Physical aspects	
The well-dress of employees	0.301 (**)
Convenience layout	0.155 (**)
2. Reliability	
The ability to perform as promises	0.189 (*)
3. Personal interaction	
Courteous employees	0.256 (**)
4. Problem solving	
The ability to handle customers' complaints	0.228 (**)
The ability to solve problems	0.227 (**)
5. Policy	
Operating hours	0.208 (**)
High quality merchandises	0.142 (*)
Convenience parking	0.276 (**)

** = statistical significance 0.01

* = statistical significance 0.05

Hypothesis 2: Customer satisfaction rendered a positive relationship with the customer loyalty to the store. Customer satisfaction showed a positive relationship with customer loyalty to the store at a statistical significance level of 0.01, with the value of correlation coefficient of 0.189.

Hypothesis 3: Customer satisfaction exhibited a positive relationship with the word-of-mouth communication. Customer satisfaction rendered a positive relationship with word-of-mouth communication to the store at a statistical significance level of 0.01, with the value of correlation coefficient of 0.270.

Hypothesis 4: The service quality exhibited a positive relationship with the customers' attitudinal loyalty to the store. The overall service quality rendered a positive relationship with customer loyalty to the store at a statistical significance level of 0.01 with the value of correlation coefficient of 0.329. 2. Some sub-elements of service quality showed a positive correlation with customer loyalty to the store with different correlation values as shown in Table 3.

Table 3. The values of correlation coefficient of sub-elements of service quality analyzed by means of the Pearson product-moment correlation coefficient.

Sub-element of service quality	Value of correlation coefficient
1. Physical aspects	
The dress of employees	0.198(**)
Convenience layout	0.190(**)
Availability of merchandises	0.183(**)
2. Reliability	
The ability to perform as promises	0.148(*)
3. Personal interaction	
Courteous employees	0.284(**)
4. Problem solving	
The ability to handle customers' complaints	0.214(**)
The ability to solve problems	0.205(**)
Willing to accept the return and exchange goods	0.142(*)
5. Policy	
Operating hours	0.264(**)
High quality merchandises	0.151(**)

** = statistical significance 0.01

* = statistical significance 0.05

Hypothesis 5: The service quality exhibited a positive relationship with the consumers' word-of-mouth communication behavior toward the store.

Service quality rendered a positive relationship with customer word-of-mouth communication to the store at a statistical

significance level of 0.01, with the value of correlation coefficient of 0.314. Some sub-elements of service quality showed a positive correlation with customer word-of-mouth communication to the store with different correlation values as shown in Table 4.

Table 4. The values of correlation coefficient of sub-elements of service quality analyzed by means of the Pearson product-moment correlation coefficient.

Sub-elements of service quality	Value of correlation coefficient
1. Physical aspects	
The dress of employees	0.175(**)
Availability of merchandises	0.132(**)
2. Reliability	
The ability to perform as promises	0.162(*)
3. Personal interaction	
Courteous employees	0.197(**)
4. Problem solving	
The ability to handle customers' complaints	0.213(**)
The ability to solve problems	0.179(**)
Willing to accept the return and exchange goods	0.198(*)
5. Policy	
Operating hours	0.229(**)
High quality merchandises	0.193(**)

** = statistical significance 0.01

* = statistical significance 0.05

DISCUSSION

Customer service has been identified as a key to success in doing business today. Retailers are inundated with the idea that effective customer service helps to differentiate a retailer from competitor. Maintaining service quality allows retailers to obtain more new customers while still building and cultivating their existing customer relationships. It can be said that by differentiating through quality customer service, retailers are able to meet the needs of their customers better than the competitors. However, the retailers attempting to improve the quality of their customer service have been offered limited guidance.

From this study, a retailer can use the perception items and the important items to pinpoint which service areas are weak and which ones need special attention. A retailer can use these service results to develop improvement strategies or to make necessary adjustments to existing strategy. Using information, retailers can help their employees improve their performance in service situation. Retailers can guide salespersons on an individual basis, concentrating on discrepancies identified by the scale and also use information from the scale to modify their employee training methods so that sales personnel can offer better customer service.

Customers at Seven-Eleven Buddha Sothorn generally have positive attitude toward the service quality provided by this store. The customers pointed out that appearance is the most important aspect. Physical evidence, such as the use of uniform, facilities, the socialization of employees toward accepting organizational goals, affects consumer perceptions of the quality of service provided. The use of uniform aids in identifying the firms' personnel physical symbol that embodies the group's ideals and attributes, implies a coherent group structure, and facilitates the perceived consistency of performance.

Reliability is the second important aspect to service quality. Reliability dimension is concerned with an organization's ability to perform a promised service dependably and accurately. When

a service organization failed to serve customer's requirement, the customer becomes dissatisfied and, finally, uses the failure to judge service quality. Additionally, reliability reflects the capacity of an organization to do it right. Garvin (1988) stated that quality was dependent on machinery being able to perform without error.

Convenience of store layout and appearance also seem to be important to customers (Baker, Grewal, and Parasuaman, 1994). Moreover, customers are willing to buy at the store that they are familiar with the management of merchandises and with the ease in moving through various sections, aisles and racks of merchandises.

Personal interaction is closely related to dimensions of responsiveness (the willingness to help customers and to provide prompt service), assurance (the knowledge and courteous of employees and their ability to convey trust and confidence), and empathy (the caring and individualized attention the firm provides to its customers). Policy dimensions include the quality of merchandise, convenience of parking, opening hours, and the usage of credit cards (Carman, 1990). Problem solving is on the daily basic. Customers are making returns and exchanges and are lodging complaints, which allow the retailers to demonstrate their commitment to customer service (Westbrook, 1981).

Another important finding of this study indicated that service quality shows a positive relationship with customers' satisfaction. Customers' satisfaction is an emotional response that can be examined on the basis of individual exchange transaction (Spreng and Singh, 1993). Woodside, Frey, and Daly (1989) viewed that perceptions of service quality were measured at the attribute level and both satisfaction and behavioral intentions. The present study showed that overall customers agreed that they were satisfied with shopping in Seven-Eleven Buddha Sothorn.

When the customers are satisfied, customers' satisfaction is linked to attitudinal loyalty. Therefore, retailers should recognize that in order to create a loyal customer base, they must satisfy the

desires and needs of the consumer. Hallowell (1996) also found that satisfaction is related to customer loyalty, and that consumer loyalty is related to profitability. The present study also showed a coefficient correlation between customer satisfaction at the store and customer loyalty. Loyal customers tend to reward retailers with increased revenue, and that they generally prefer to concentrate their purchase with retailers that they trust.

Moreover, the present study indicated that customers' satisfaction is linked to word-of-mouth communication. Consumers can gain a wealth of information about the store simply by communicating with a friend, family member, or acquaintance who has already visited the store. Beatty et al. (1996) reported that satisfied retail consumers frequently engage in positive word-of-mouth communication, and thus advertising for the retailer with whom they meet.

Therefore, it can be concluded that good service quality ensures satisfaction and attempt to establish loyalty tendencies in customers, which results in the development of customer advocacy and, finally, leads to positive word-of-mouth communication.

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATION

In response to the increasingly competitive marketplace, retailers are continually seeking strategies to insulate and increase profit. An emphasis on service quality is argued to be a direct outcome of a market orientation and the search for competitive advantage.

Delivering quality service and meeting the needs of customers are a difficult challenge for many service providers. This study investigated the importance of service quality to ensure customer satisfaction, customer loyalty, and word-of-mouth communication.

From the results of the present study, we recommend that if retailers want to improve their performance in order to increase customer loyalty and satisfaction, retailers should consider (1) providing convenience parking and operating hours, and high quality merchandises; (2) increasing

the quality and conscientious employees to handle customers' complaints and customers' problems; (3) improving the behavior of employees with regard to their neat and good-looking uniforms, and their consistent courtesy to customers; (4) arranging an easy-to-get shop layout to make it easy for customers to move around to find things they want; (5) willing to accept the returns and exchanges of goods; and, lastly, (6) keeping the promises.

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