

A CONCEPTUAL SERVICE QUALITY MAP: THE VALUE OF A WIDE OPENED PERSPECTIVE

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1. Back to theory: the principal models for services quality

The debate about service quality, which dates back to the late seventies, has resulted in a large body of research representing a multiplicity of approaches.

The concept of service quality was proposed by the Nordic school in the nineteen eighties (Gummesson, 1979, Grönross, 1982) and picked up in North America (Parasuraman, Zeithaml, Berry, 1985; Berry, Parasuraman, Zeithaml, 1988). Based on customer perceptions¹, the concept of service quality took on the role of a *tout court* paradigm. The idea of quality involving a customer satisfaction formula, spread from services to manufacturing and even to relationships between governmental services and the citizen.

From this initial background a number of models for quality in services were developed by academics and consultants. A model is in this sense a logical construct used in an effort to interpret and predict a real phenomenon (Simon, 1957) by breaking it down into a small number of variables that make it possible to simplify, unravel and dismantle the phenomenon so its component parts are visible for examination (Baccarani, 2010).

The first service quality analysis model was produced in the eighties (Grönross, 1983; Grönross, 1984): being the *total perceived quality model*, based on the individual's perception of the quality of a service. The customer compares his expectations with his experience of the service, i.e. technical quality (that obtained by the user) and functional quality (how the service is provided), perceived through the filter of the company's image.

This was followed by the *Gap Analysis Model*, developed from exploratory investigations conducted by the North American scholars Parasuraman, Zeithaml and Berry (1985), starting out from the supposition that the quality of a service is expressed according to a disconfirmation paradigm (Oliver, 1980; Churchill, Surprenant, 1982), that is to say the discrepancy between the customer's expectation and the customer's perception of the service. The Gap Analysis Model:

- suggests a number of certain key factors (word of mouth communication, personal needs, past experience and external communications) which influence customer expectations,
- identifies the determinants of service quality (reliability, response capacity, competence, accessibility, courtesy, communication, credibility, security, understanding the customer and tangible aspects), which are evaluated by the customer,
- identifies failings in quality perceived by the customer and the service provider's internal gaps, to find an approach capable of removing or at least reducing these failings.

On the basis of these models, the nineties saw the development of the *synthetic model of perceived service quality* (Brogowicz, Delene, Lyth, 1990), according to which perceived quality derives from the total service quality gap, i.e. the technical quality gap and the functional quality gap, each of which is strictly connected to the respective quality expectations.

The *4 Q model of offering quality* (Gummesson, 1993) considers both goods and services. This model compares customer expectations, experiences and company's image and brand to customer perceived quality. Perceived quality has two sources: design quality and production and delivery quality. The results of production and delivery quality are relational quality and technical quality.

¹ Quality is defined as "degree and direction of discrepancy between customers' service perception and expectations" (Parasuraman, Zeithaml, Berry, 1985).

The Gap Analysis Model is in its turn revisited and extended to embrace seven gaps (of knowledge, of standards, of delivery, of internal communications, of perception, of interpretation and of service), each of which can occur at any moment or stage in service planning and performance (Lovelock, 1994).

If all of the models considered up to this point are characterised by their static nature, in 1993 Grönross highlighted the need to construct dynamic models to be able to come to a real understanding of perceived service quality and, thanks also to the work of Gummesson (1987; 1993), the approach which emerges is that of *relational quality analysis*², by which the service company sets out to create value for the customer by collaborating with the customer himself.

An early relational quality model carried out an analysis of the interactions in actions and episodes between service company and customers (Liljander, Strandvik, 1995). By way of a comparative parameter, the customer compares company performance over a series of episodes to determine the relational quality.

Following these studies, a relational grid was drawn up that also shows the sequences (Holmlund, 1997) involved in the formation of the relationship itself. Communication plays a particularly important role in this regard, not so much as a unilateral tool but rather as interaction and dialogue between provider and customer (Ballantyne, 1999-2000). This communication is based on the participation of both parties (Bohm, 1996), and on their desire to establish and maintain reciprocal understanding (Dichter, 1996) and to think together to solve any problems that arise (Grönross, 2007).

Finding that customer expectations of the service may change over time Reeves and Bednar (1994) construct a *dynamic expectations model*, which broke down expectations into indefinite, explicit and implicit expectations (Ojasalo, 1999a,b). The service company must always satisfy implicit expectations and understand the indefinite expectations so that they can be made to emerge as explicit expectations. The provider of the service can then be sure of having performed a service that satisfies the customer, also by transforming explicit but unrealistic expectations into realistic expectations. For their part, over time the customers learn to carry out the same conversions (dynamic non intentional effect). Where the changing expectations are not satisfied, there is on the one hand a failure of the service provision (Nyquist, Bitner, Booms, 1985; Bitner, Nyquist, Booms, 1985) and on the other hand the customer may switch to another provider who will satisfy his expectations.

2. A proposal of a conceptual service quality map

The variety of models described above may give a sense of fragmentation in the approaches to service quality. In reality, however, quality is never the result of a sophisticated and detailed point of view connected to one particular aspect of the process leading to it. It would be more correct to see quality as the result of a holistic view of a process that embraces the kind of relationship desired by the customer. This view considers quality at the same time in its different components, i.e. processes that bind together expectations and the results achieved.

In this sense, we would like to propose alongside existing models a wide open perspective, with the aim of recomposing a unitary framework that could bring together different authors and different research branches. This is because quality in services needs input both from top management and from operative staff, with a generalised ability to view the whole service provision system and implement company policies both in normal situations and where problems and unforeseen circumstances arise.

The paper intends therefore to develop synergies between existing models with the aim of producing a more generally applicable and more comprehensive service quality model.

² The importance of the interactions had already been found at the end of '70 by Grönross (1978), but the paternity of introduction of "relationship marketing" in service marketing field must be recognized to Berry (1983).

This will be done by drawing up a conceptual service quality map (Figure 1), within which there will be numerous variables as well as dimensions and sub-dimensions that influence customers quality judgement. The map takes as its starting point the consolidated management model for the *customer evaluation of service quality* known as the Gap Analysis Model (Parasuraman, Zeithaml, Berry, 1985, explained above). Such a model will be revised in the light of other conceptual approaches concerning expected quality, perceived quality and the relation between these two quality points of view.

The *customer evaluation of service quality* proposed by the model is:

- *subjective*, insofar as it varies from person to person,
- *individual*, since each person makes his or her evaluation in a personal way,
- *relative*, because every customer of a service may have very different perceptions of the service, depending on the individual's needs, expectations and personal and environmental experience,
- *intuitive*, not being based on an analytical assessment,
- *multidimensional*, in the sense that the customer takes into consideration multiple quality factors (Zeithaml, Parasuraman, Berry, 1992).

The conceptual service quality map identifies, as the Gap Analysis Model does, five fundamental gaps that explain the quality shortfalls:

1. the gap between customer expectations and management perceptions of those expectations,
2. the gap between management perceptions of customer expectations and the firm's service quality specifications,
3. the gap between service quality specifications and actual service delivery,
4. the gap between actual service delivery and external communication about the service,
5. the gap between expected service and perceived service.

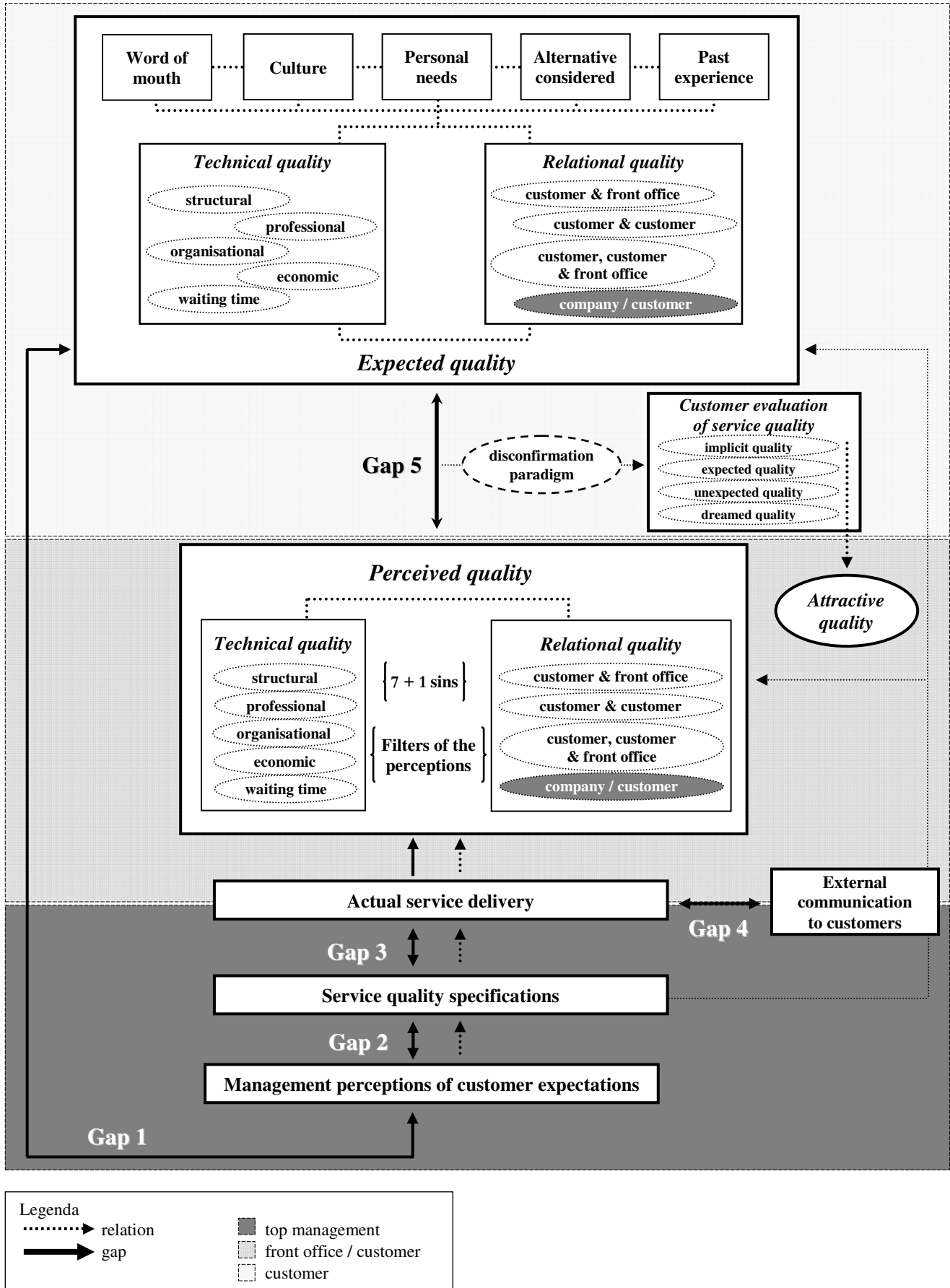
The reflection about the determinants of the various service quality gaps leads to the identification, in addition to the variables in the original model, of some increasingly important dimensions and variables for service quality:

- attractive quality,
- technical quality, which can be broken down into:
 - structural quality,
 - professional quality,
 - organisational quality,
 - economic quality,
 - waiting time quality,
- relational quality, which can be broken down into:
 - quality of interactions between customer and front office,
 - quality of interactions between customer and customer,
 - quality of interactions between customer, customer and front office,
 - quality of relation between company and customer,
- perception filters,
- culture,
- alternatives considered.

The resulting model is undoubtedly a theoretical model that needs to be subjected to empirical testing for its validation and for the identification of the various causal existing nexuses. It should in the same way be thought as a work-in-progress model. Our proposal also therefore actively seeks to attract contributions for further general discussion.

The following pages will focus on discussion of the logic underlying the variants proposed for application to the original model. To facilitate explanation, the model will be applied to a service sector that is both well known and also of a certain complexity, that is the area of hotel service.

Fig. 1: A conceptual service quality map



Source: Authors' elaboration on various models

3. Hotel service traits in the light of the disconfirmation paradigm and attractive quality

It is a well known fact that hotel service quality level is not deducible from how many stars the hotel has (in Italy from 1 to 5³), since such attribution is based primarily on structural quantitative factors, for example rooms size, without evaluating the conditions of the hotel itself, nor a great part of the intangible factors involved in service provision.

Indeed hotel accommodation largely consists of intangible performances supported by a number of tangible tools. The performance cannot be stored as stock and its production is simultaneous with its use, with the direct participation of the customer (guest).

It follows that, as with most services, it is impossible to manage and control hotel service quality according to the methods applied to goods industrial production. Hospitality cannot be shown and evaluated before its purchase (only the physical support can be viewed), while the service cannot be produced in advance to deal with peaks in demand, so that yield management systems become necessary to link demand to production capacity. Finally, any defects will be difficult to eliminate without the customer becoming aware of them. The production process happens at least in part in front of the very eyes of the customer, who experiences the hotel as a temporary substitute for his own home (Sirriani, 1997; Mauri, 2004; Bonelli, 2009).

Given the foregoing, the customer evaluation of service quality is based on a comparison, or “confirmation” rather than “disconfirmation”, with respect to some comparative term already held in mind by the customer at the pre-service stage⁴ (Grönross, 1982; Lewis, Booms, 1983; Grönross, 1984; Wyckoff, 1984).

The confirmation/disconfirmation paradigm of customer expectation provides a valid explanation of what would otherwise remain inexplicable. It clarifies the reasons why customers at luxury hotels are so often dissatisfied (due to excessively high expectation levels increasing the extent of gap number 5), while guests at one or two star hotels and at Bed & Breakfasts frequently express positive judgements (where they have received the service they expected and hence gap 5 is reduced to zero)⁵.

What the Gap Analysis Model does not explicitly address, and what should be brought into the equation in the competitive, dynamic and overcrowded industry of hotel accommodation, is the dimension referred to as *attractive quality* (Kano *et al.*, 1984).

It is always true that it is not enough to leave the customers “simply satisfied”⁶ if you wish to be preferred by them or have their loyalty over time. It is necessary for the service offered to be in some way attractive, for the personnel to understand how to go that step further (Lash, 1989; Jones, Sasser, 1995). This may include the performance of a service with a surprise element (dreamed quality), or something that makes the whole experience memorable.

An example of unexpected quality may be provided by a hotel maintenance worker who cleans the windows of guests’ cars parked in the garage. In this case it is likely that customers will recall this attention positively and have an extra reason for affording the hotel preference on future occasions and pass on their experience by word of mouth.

³ Hotel standard definition in Italy is set by Gazzetta Ufficiale of the Italian Republic, General Series, 34, 11-02-2009.

⁴ “Satisfaction is defined in terms of perceived performance in relation to some comparison standard held prior to purchase ...” (Myers, 1991).

⁵ It is worth pointing out once again that there is a distinction between quality and quantity in hotel services. The “more services for the customer = more quality” equation does not hold up. The different provisions of secondary services, such as restaurant, swimming pool, spa area, 24-hour bar etc. serve more to distinguish the various types of hotel products (where guests may be in transit, at a conference, on a family holiday) between them as well as from non hotel accommodation such as farm holidays or B&Bs. A hospitality structure particularly rich in secondary services is not necessarily better in quality than a no frills hotel for business travelers.

⁶ Some studies underline as the shape of quality function is not linear, but rather asymmetric: with the improvement of supplier performance, perceived quality does not always proportionally increase. It changes in variable measure (Strandvik, 1994).

Another example of surprising service, by way of service tailored to the particular customer, is provided by P. Mene, head of service quality for the Ritz Carlton chain: “If we learn that your preference is for a pillow stuffed with stones, unlikely though that might be, when you arrive at a hotel in our group, you will find your pillow stuffed with stones”⁷. Here the service customisation links up with the global dimensions of the hotel chain that can be found in almost all parts of the world.

What examples could there be of attractive quality features that would be appreciated by a visitor to a “normal” hotel, leaving aside the frills of a *boutique hotel*?

- a drink or an ice-cream for children during a family check in, where everyone is tired and stressed out by the journey,
- a coffee or an aperitif for the guest arriving at the hotel without a reservation, while checking on room availability,
- the opportunity to check in seated at a desk rather than standing at the reception counter,
- the chance to choose from a selection of pillows,
- a small gift for a guest who has a birthday during his or her stay,
- a clear and prompt problem solving ability,
- the engendering of familiarity in the relationship with a non artificial recall and use of the guest’s name.

These are of course nothing more than a few ideas, albeit undemanding, that will however be incorporated in customer expectation upon any subsequent access to the service.

Any level of customer satisfaction is in fact “something that is momentary, that leads the customer on the next level” and once that level has been reached he quickly gets used to it, wishing for more and more (Galvano, 1990, 82 e ss.). There is therefore a risk in a spiralling increase in expectation, of possibly losing those customers who, used to the best, no longer find their expectations fulfilled (George, Berry, 1981; Rust, Oliver, 2000). On the other hand the competition forces the business in this direction and hence attractive quality becomes a powerful approach to support a process of continuous innovation in the organisation. This need not be a worry, since the innovations in question primarily attend to the needs of the customers without normally requiring a particularly great investment. An important source for his process is undoubtedly the analysis of the most common errors that can be identified directly by the organisation itself or pointed out by the customers.

4. The dimensions of perceived quality

In this context, the conceptual service quality map underscores the existence of two dimensions along which perceived quality and expected quality align themselves, namely:

- technical quality,
- relational quality.

These directly connect with the approach first proposed by Grönroos (1982) that made the distinction between technical quality and functional quality. The map however proposes a further step, i.e. it details the action of the components that determine the levels of both dimension.

4.1 The technical component

The *technical component* of quality is connected to the most visible elements of the hotel offering. Substantially these elements set forth “what” is being provided: first and foremost the location, when the hotel is open (seasonally or all year), the secondary services provided, the staff competence, the size of the rooms and of the common areas, the neatness and cleanliness of the rooms, the employment of construction methods that permit energy savings and so forth.

⁷ See “The perfect fit”, Profile, Continental Airlines, house organ May, 1996 (Bateson, Hoffman, 2000, 354).

Going into further details, technical quality can in turn be broken down into structural, professional, organisational, economic and waiting time dimensions.

Structural quality refers to the place in which the service is delivered to the customer (McDougall, Levesque, 1994; Rust, Oliver, 1994), i.e. the *Servicescape* (a term coined by Bitner, 1992). It includes the various elements that make up the physical environment of the service encounter.

In a hotel the physical support consists first and foremost in the building, with its particular construction techniques, its electrical and plumbing systems, the climate control, its furnishings, the layout and the style to go on then to the actual “instruments” of the service provision in the form of beds, mattresses, kitchens and dining rooms, relaxation areas, conference room facilities and so forth.

When the customer thinks of a hotel, these are the things that first come to his mind. The physical support is therefore particularly important in the hospitality sector, especially in the early stages of customer’s path (at the time of choosing the hotel, first impressions at reception and start of the stay) but also at later stages when the customer makes value judgements on the condition (functionality, maintenance, décor, cleaning, etc.) of the physical structure.

The hotel has the function of temporary home and welcomes its guests within its walls, so the perception of certain structural characteristics induces cognitive and/or emotional reactions. Of particular importance, according to the Servicescape model, are the environmental conditions (the temperature, lighting, noise, music and smells), the spaces and their function (the perception of size, shapes, colours and functionality), as well as the signs, symbols and artefacts (logos, writing and notices) (Bonfanti, in printing).

Structural quality is controllable by the company and there are in fact innumerable examples in the hotel industry of how quality is aimed at primarily by way of this dimension. Hotels “promise” potential guests a quality service through the presentation of a reception area that is lit and furnished in welcoming fashion, with images of finely furnished rooms or well equipped conference halls, and so on.

Indeed, in some cases hotel quality begins and ends with its structural quality, in the sense that the work to enhance the hotel is limited only to improvements in structure and furnishings (the so-called upgrading of tourist services).

The logic of structural quality should however be wider, since an ideal physical support should:

- facilitate the operational roles of the staff,
- help the staff and the guest understand how to behave (for example the presence of a counter rather than a desk implies a different kind of interaction),
- meet all needs associated with the stay in a place, for all guests, including those with special needs (consider the complex needs of the disabled guest who, for example, does not only wish to go to the toilet),
- offer something that distinguishes the hotel from the competitors (e.g. the Design Hotels is a network of more than 190 independent hotels in 40 countries that feature “thought-provoking design and groundbreaking architecture”).

Professional quality (Rosenbluth, 1991; Schlesinger, Heskett, 1991; Schneider, Wheeler, Fox, 1992) regards that other essential part of service provision system, i.e. the staff. By professional quality is meant the basic and specialist training of the front office and of the back office staff, their specific competence, knowledge and skills (Normann, 1984), as well as the extent to which their skills have been updated and aligned with best practice.

The professional skills of the staff are based on the training system, built upon and developed by practical and reflective experience, while the exchange of experience with other staff in the industry and refresher courses are fundamental to further growth. They are absolutely central to services with a highly intangible element, based on the competency of the supplier, as it is in all consulting and fiduciary services.

The importance of professional qualities of operators in the hotel is thus not in doubt, understood that is as precision, reliability, systematic conduct, speed of response, knowledge of the competencies of colleagues, knowledge of the tourist area and its attractions, good personal appearance, knowledge of different languages and cultures and familiarity with information technology. Professional quality makes it possible for the staff to be genuinely “useful” to the customer and lays the foundations of relational quality.

This quality area is at least in theory subject to control by the company, which can improve it through staff selection and training, as well as through the employment of suitable incentive systems.

Organisational quality regards the “rules” according to which service performance functions. Rules may be oriented to satisfying customer needs rather than only ensuring internal efficiency.

There is no doubt that a service providing system may only operate where certain rules of conduct and procedures are established. These may primarily derive from specific planning of production processes (Shostack, 1984; Eiglier, Langeard, 1987; Shostack, 1987; Berry, 1988), aimed at standardising behaviours and results through *a priori* definition of steps, actions, resources and responsibilities. Production process planning is aimed expressly at reducing any uncertainty inherent to the service provision system, making the result more predictable, reducing the perceived risk for the customer and any possible ambiguity in relation to alternative ways of acting by the personnel.

For a hotel, therefore, planning the various production processes (such as reception, bookings, room service, food and beverage provision, maintenance and procurement) is a delicate managerial task insofar as it aims to ensure that the satisfaction of customer needs is not left to the vagaries of chance or simply the professional competence or good will of the staff. The plans will include, for example, operational procedures for the cleaning of rooms that standardise in time and space a variable that is essential to the service quality of a hotel, i.e. its standard of cleanliness.

This should not lead to the assumption or to the conclusion that the provision of such services can be carried out with the same rigour and precision as a production process in manufacturing. This is not in fact the case, and for at least two good reasons:

- the production processes for services are at least in part inseparable from their “consumption”, with the presence and the active participation of the customer as prosumer (Toffler, 1980) / prouser (Baccarani, 2007) / co-producer of the service (Bettencourt *et al.*, 2002; Bendapudi, Leone, 2003). The result is impossibility of complete standardisation;
- the unexpected is part of the daily experience of the industry, as it is introduced by the customer in relation to his/her particular psychological and physical facts and events;
- the interactions between contact staff and customers is partly governed by rules that are not established or defined by the organisation but flow from the cultural context and custom. Social rules dictate roles, or expectations of behaviour, which are then acted out as if stage performances by the supplier and the customer, with their satisfaction depending on the coherence of the role play acted out between them. Both parties are likely to be dissatisfied if the operational procedures of the company were to be too strictly defined (Abelson, 1976; Smith, Houston, 1982; Solomon *et al.*, 1985; Eiglier, Langeard, 1987).

It follows that in a hotel, as in any service business involving high levels of contact, the organisational quality flows from a balance between the absence of and the presence of rules, where a margin must be maintained for a personal approach and coherence with personal roles. Excessively restrictive rules are without doubt an obstacle to the service organisational quality and could leave the organisation in a state of *rigor mortis* (Albrecht, 1992).

It is therefore increasingly more frequently accepted wisdom that the hotel should adopt strict rules as regards safety and security, particularly as regards the prevention of terrorism and deterrence in relation to petty crime. On the other hand it is quite unacceptable to have such strict rules with regard to mandatory interface between chambermaids and customer, given that normal interaction requires as little reference to chambermaids as possible, with the customer free to advance any type of request to the personnel at reception, or to the porters and concierge.

While the drawing up of production process plans is a step towards controlling organisational quality for the company, customer participation and the roles of contact personnel largely escape company control, influencing directly the service relational quality.

What is left is that the logic of organisational quality must be applied in the following areas:

- improving the personnel's understanding of the service by clearly describing the production processes,
- going beyond an excessively fragmented view of the service in terms of departments and offices (the processes in question are typically transversal),
- meeting the expectations of customers and simplifying their lives without creating meaningless procedures that oblige customers to go out of their way to have any of their problems solved.

Economic quality can be understood in two ways. On the one hand it is the capacity of the business to have the customer appreciate the value of the service performed, that is to justify the requested price (Eiglier, Langeard, 1987; Monroe, 1989; Holmlund, 1997). On the other hand it may be an expression of cost leadership that permits price reduction for the service with a consequent advantage for the customer. This latter meaning, particularly prevalent at times of economic crisis, leads to an interpretation of economic quality as the search for efficiency or productivity (Bateson, Hoffman, 2000) in service production.

Where efficiency regards the relationship between output and input (for example, in a restaurant the number of meals served in relation to the number of dining room staff in attendance), economic efficiency can be increased if:

- part-time or general staff are employed,
- processes analogous to those in industrial production are adopted, as occurs in highly automated services or where customer choice is significantly restricted,
- the customer is required to work in the place of the personnel, as happens in numerous self-service situations (filling up at petrol stations, using car washes, buffet bars, etc.).

If we reflect for a moment on the efficiency examples above, widely employed in the hotel industry as they are, it can be seen that they frequently impinge on perceived quality. Part-time or general multi-task staff are often less qualified, resulting in lower levels of performance. The use of highly automated services (for example with hotel bookings), is subject to the risk of having to ignore personal requests not contemplated by the system, while in any case the organisational structure will be less flexible, bound as it is to efficiency rules. For example, the rule "all rooms will be ready for assignment at the same time" prevents to welcome a tired traveller who arrives before the time check in service is open.

Perhaps the most promising course of action is to involve the customer in the process, since this not only results in cost savings but also means that the proactive customer has some measure of control over the situation restored to him. This may be the case where, for example, a hotel has kitchen facilities that allows a mother to deal with the feeding needs of babies at times that are not normal meal times, where a self-service laundry allows people to stay away from home without having to carry too many changes of clothing and heavy baggage, and where the bedroom is equipped with a kettle, tea and tisanes, which also makes the guest feel more at home.

Economic quality may be improved without impacting on perceived quality if the customer accepts the proactive role. This will be more likely where he trusts the company, if the benefits accruing from such participation have been expressly explained and if the physical support is suitable and user friendly. Such innovations will need to be monitored by the business (Lovelock, Young, 1979).

Waiting time quality (Maister, 1985; Dube-Rioux, Schmitt, Leclerc, 1988; Kartz, Larson, Larson, 1991; Taylor, 1995; Hui, Tse, 1996) is a factor that emerges at significant moments in the production processes of services, where the customer finds the service provision not ready, not available or occupied by another customer such that there is no choice but to wait.

This may easily occur because the time of arrival of the customer is not under the control of the business and there may be a temporary imbalance between the demand peaks and the capacity of

the system to provide the service. Although crowding and queues are wholly normal aspects of modern daily life, the fact remains that for a whole range of reasons waiting time generates stress and anxiety in the person concerned. The way that waiting time is handled significantly affects the perception of service quality.

Given the nature of the service being provided, the business must take suitable steps to properly manage customers who are left waiting (Fitzsimmons, Sullivan, 1982), with choices including:

- making appointments, with booking lists,
- multiple queuing, with a queue in front of each service provider,
- a single guided queue with no choice of choosing the provider of the service,
- the “take a number” system.

In hotels, waiting time may arise on check in (imagine the impact on a small reception desk of the arrival of a group of tourists), on check out (here waiting time is even more anxious as it is normally the start of a new day for the customer), at the restaurant and in other occasions. The customer is very rarely alone in the service provision system.

The quality of waiting time may be improved by simple devices if the hotel management takes to heart one or more of “Maister’s rules” (Maister, 1985):

- waiting times seem longer than active times,
- waiting can be very boring; the organisation that offers some form of distraction effectively shortens the wait,
- the customer must be involved as soon as possible in the service production process,
- anxiety makes waiting time feel longer,
- uncertainty makes waiting time seem much longer than waiting time of known duration,
- waiting times without explanation seem much longer than those where an explanation has been given,
- waiting times in competition with others seem longer than those follow clear rules,
- the higher the value of the service in the customer’s perception the more he is willing to wait,
- waiting alone feels longer than it does in a group.

In a hotel restaurant, if a menu is brought to a table quickly and an aperitif offered, the waiting time seems less, as also applies if a video is projected at reception to entertain customers until a member of staff becomes available.

Evidently technical quality, together with all its sub-dimensions indicated above, significantly influences customer perceptions and expectations. Nevertheless technical quality cannot alone explain the customer’s judgement, given that this is not only influenced by “what” is provided, but also by “how”.

4.2 The relational component

The second macro dimension for service quality regards the relational component, consisting of four aspects:

- customer - front office interaction,
- customer - customer interaction,
- customer - customer - front office interaction,
- company - customer relation.

The human component of service provision is manifested in the personal interaction area, with the players being service company staff and the customer. The relationship may therefore be characterised by friendliness or antipathy, politeness or impoliteness, attention or distraction or coolness or warmth and may be personalised or standardised.

Interaction between customer and front office (Wilson, 1972; Bettencourt, Gwinner, 1996), with the “emotional labour” (Hochschild, 1983) that may be involved, assumes particular importance in relation to the service that is provided and that is perceived for the very reason that it is personal in nature, in contrast with other impersonal aspects of the service. The customer may forgive a failing

in the technical component of the service but will not so easily brush aside cold or unpleasant behaviour from reception staff or the rudeness of a waiter.

The interaction between a hotel customer and front office is determinant for such services as bookings, reception, porter services and restaurant table service. Front office personnel must have relational skills, know how to listen, be capable to quickly understand the customer, be able to explain things clearly, be empathetic, sensitive, willing to solve problems, available on demand, careful to special needs and be naturally kind and polite. Of course not all employees have these qualities in equal measure, nor are they always willing to put them to the service of each customer during heavy shifts where repetitive and stressful tasks may have to be carried out.

Front office staff should at very least take pains to avoid what have been called the “sins of service” (Albrecht, 1992), which put in a nutshell the forms of conduct most frequently complained as regards relational quality:

1. *Apathy*. The lack of any interest in the customer who, in the worst cases, is not even “seen” as a person. The classic example is at the reception desk where the employee hands the guest the key with a visibly bored expression, without looking up or proffering any kind of greeting.
2. *Haste*. The front office person tries to “get rid of” the customer without really addressing his or her problem; he adopts a standard procedure that gives the impression that he has done something, while in fact no useful action has been taken. A typical example might be that of a chambermaid carrying out a hurried and ineffectual retouch of a room after a complaint that it is not clean.
3. *Automatism*. The person at the front office treats the guests in mechanical fashion, following a relational routine that may provide for greetings, smiles, expressions of cordiality manifested in repetitive, impersonal or essentially stupid way. Such behaviour is often reserved for the hotel’s telephone booking line.
4. *Frostiness*. A hostile, aloof, churlish or vaguely annoyed attitude of staff that makes some guests feel embarrassed or inferior. The example is that found in certain luxury restaurants where the *maitre* or the owner conduct themselves as superior beings to the customer.
5. *Condescension*. The opposite extreme is found among other staff members (some waiters for example) who seek to ingratiate themselves with the customer by assuming a submissive attitude that is quite clearly feigned. The common factor in this sin is a failure to understand the point of view of the customer, i.e. a complete lack of empathy.

The defects in relational quality, presented as “sins” above, can be put together with two others that are more directly pertinent to organisational quality (excessive rule making and useless procedures) to make up the check list of errors to be avoided (the 7 sins). The check list can be used as a simple self-assessment model for the personnel.

To this undisputed list could be added at least one further “sin”, namely *inertia*, where despite evident pressures from different sources the personnel continues to proceed, somewhat annoyed, at an unaltered speed that makes the prolonged waiting time all the more trying, this sometimes happen at the moment of the check in or check out (Baccarani, 2007).

It would however be reductive to approach front office quality only in terms of errors to avoid. The culture of error needs to be harnessed in organisation so that complaints and episodes of disservice can be appreciated as essential learning opportunities for the personnel.

On a positive note, improvements in relational quality requires the transformation of sins into virtues: apathy turned into interest in the guest, haste into speed of response, automatism into service personalisation, frostiness into warmth, condescension and ingratiation into dignity and rules and procedures into problem-solving (Ugolini, 2005).

The interaction between front office staff and the guest is a sub-dimension of relational quality partly subject to the control of the business. Apart from the importance of selecting front office personnel who already possess good relational qualities, the company cannot be sure that the interaction will in fact be positive. Guests may themselves be in a bad mood (Solomon, 1990) or little disposed to cooperate (Zemke, Anderson, 1990), and critical situations may as a consequence arise (Bitner *et al.*, 1994) with the potential for conflict (Shamir, 1980).

The contact staff is the final arbiter for the outcome of moments of truth. For this reason they should be assigned suitable areas of discretion and autonomy, a status that enables them to deal with guests, with possible emotional support from specialists and constant support from their managers (Eisenberger, Rhoades, 2001).

The importance of the relational component is destined to rise as hotel structures and standards become more uniform, with some chains running according to strict formulae. Where the technical formula is ever more standardised, it is the relational aspect that distinguishes one hotel from another.

On careful examination, the daily life of a hotel is an interweaving of interactions between guest and guest or guest and front office as if on a stage where the play is the guest's stay at a different place from his own home.

The *interactions between guest and guest* (Baker, 1987; Martin, Pranter, 1989; Grove, Fisk, 1997) contribute to determining the atmosphere of the service, in itself raising or dramatically reducing customer satisfaction (think for example of "neighbours" at the next table or the next bungalow who socialise or disturb, as the case may be). Sometimes more or less spontaneous interaction between customers is an essential ingredient of the product provided, particularly in those forms of hospitality oriented towards socialisation, as in tourist villages, cruises for singles and so forth. It is clear a sub-dimension of relational quality that lies largely outside the sphere of control of the business concern.

The company may try to influence relational quality through its front office personnel, assigning to them the roles of intermediary, facilitator or arbiter of the interactions between guests.

For this reason, there emerges a third sub-dimension in relational quality, that as *between guest, guest and front office*, during which interaction the staff has the task of supervising observance of the organisation's rules, to avoid any forms of discrimination between guests or to prevent preferential treatment being meted out to some guests to the detriment of others.

There is a further dimension of relational quality that goes beyond front office interaction with the guest, that is relation longevity, mutual trust and development of loyalty. This latter dimension can be seen in family run hotels where habitual guests are afforded special treatment by virtue of their loyalty and the length of their relationship as clients. In managerially organised hotels, the focus on the customer-business relationship usually homes in on the following:

- the establishment of loyalty programmes, with the recognition of special guest status,
- drop-out management, where the company seeks to identify why guests do not return, to monitor drop-outs, to identify the guests and situations at risk and provide incentives to employees to keep customers,
- critical moment management, particularly where the customer is not satisfied or makes a complaint.

4.3 Perception filters

Perceived service does not correspond to actual service. Service is "read" by the customer by way of cognitive and perceptual processes that are wholly subjective, where the outcome is perceived service. This perceived service may also be very different from that actually provided because of perception filters (Quartapelle, 1994), that increase or decrease the value of the service to the customer's eyes.

The principal perception filter categories applicable also to the hotel industry are the following:

- the image of the service provider (Bessom, 1973; Eiglier, Langeard, 1987);
- the customer sense of control (Bateson, 1985; Bateson, Hui, 1990);
- the perception of risk or uncertainty (Kaplan, Szybillo, Jacoby, 1974; Murray, Schlacter, 1990; Laroche, Bergeron, Goutaland, 2003; Laroche *et al.*, 2004).

The *image of the service provider* strongly influences perceived quality since it amounts to a pre-judgment that guides evaluation in more or less favourable directions. If a customer suffers, for example, food poisoning on holiday it is more likely it will be attributed to the inexperience of the

management in a hotel that has recently appeared on the market, while it is more likely to be put down to chance in the case of a consolidated holiday resort. In the latter case the problem may be treated less seriously by guests due to the reservoir of trust that has built up over time.

The *sense of control* is a contingent or situation-based factor that determines the customer state of mind at the time he participates in the provision of the service, making waiting time or overcrowding, particularly uncomfortable for him. Some devices widely used in the provision of meals, such as buffet service, shorten waiting times and make the guest feel to act as he choose and serve himself as he please, increasing his sense of control over the situation.

Finally, the *perception of risk* or of uncertainty may leave the customer feeling anxious about the decision to stay away from home, or about the stay itself. A whole series of fears are associated with travelling (Gulotta, 1997), including the fear of flying, fears about foreign food and the fear of strangers (Baccarani, 2005).

The travelling tourist is in an unknown environment where every familiar feature of daily life is replaced by something different that may seem strange and unaccustomed. The traveller may feel uncertain or confused, may miss family, friends, his work environment and accustomed social status. The result may be feelings of real anxiety (Canestrini, 2004), and these should be recognised by those operating in the tourist industry.

Many organisational strategies in tourism are more or less expressly designed to reduce the perception of risk on the part of the tourist: examples include international cuisine, where more or less the same food is found everywhere, voluntary segregation of tourists in villages or places away from local communities (real environmental bubbles), the group holiday formula that isolates those travelling together and maniacal security controls for travellers.

5. The dimensions and the determinants of expected quality

The dimensions of perceived quality illustrated here above are also the bases upon which expected quality is built.

When, in effect, the traveller approaches a hotel, he already has a sort of “ideal service” in mind that is a summary of his expectations. This ideal service for him is the yardstick used for the evaluation of the service in terms of confirmation/disconfirmation.

Expected quality is built upon the quality aspects that the customer himself considers to be important. In the case of a hotel, for example, this may mean how clean the bathrooms are, the choice of meals on the menu, the presence of a garage, whether there is early check in without a supplementary charge, and so on. Not all of the variables will have equal importance when a judgement of satisfaction is finally made. Some will have high priority, others will be of marginal importance, and will of course vary from customer to customer, as well as over time, and upon the occasion for the same customer.

The conceptual service quality map suggests that expectations relate to a plurality of factors, both in the area of technical quality and in that of relational quality.

The hotel guest may therefore have quite specific expectations in relation to the structural quality of the service encounter: the size and welcoming nature of the spaces, the efficiency of the utilities and equipment and what amounts to an acceptable level of cleanliness. He may harbour expectations regarding the professional quality of the staff, as well as the observance of rules and roles in the performance of the service itself. If he is paying the cost of the service out of his own pocket, he may very well have clear expectations about economic quality and value for money. If he expects to encounter queues and some waiting time, the customer may expect the hotel to do take action to make any such waiting times as bearable as possible.

It is likely that the customer will also have expectations about the relational component of the service, that is to say the relational skills of the contact staff. It may be that the guest will have more

or less explicit needs to socialise with other guests and/or with the personnel. Lastly he may expect suitable loyalty and membership programmes to be provided by the service company.

The overall picture for expected service is thus vary varied and the model proposed helps to improve its interpretation.

How, however, are these expectations formed? What are their determinants?

The proposed model identifies two further variables that run alongside those of the classic Gap Analysis Model (Parasuraman, Zeithaml, Berry, 1985) that is word of mouth, personal needs, past experience and external communications to customers. The two additional variables are culture and considered alternatives.

The *culture* in question consists of a pool of values, ideas and attitudes shared by the members of a community⁸. As a variable explicative of the formation of service quality expectations, culture embraces received education, learned values and customer expertise.

Depending on his culture, the customer may or may not be able to understand the logic according to which the service is organised and may be more or less willing to accept disparities in treatment as between different customers, or be more or less patient or tolerant with respect to any disservice.

The culture variable also incorporates the personal service philosophy of the individual, or “the customer’s underlying generic attitude about the meaning of service and the proper conduct of service providers. Customers who are themselves in service business or have worked for them in the past seem to have especially strong philosophies” (Zeithaml, Berry, Parasuraman, 1991, 7).

As may be imagined, it is a complex construct contributed to by national culture, with its masculinity vs. femininity, competitiveness vs. cooperation as shown by Hofstede (1991). It is likely that quality expectation levels vary significantly among groups of customers from different national cultures.

In a hotel, the cultural dimension is present in welcoming guests from different countries and with different levels of expertise. The habitual traveller tends to present with more demanding and detailed expectations than the novice; while the expert traveller’s expectations always include a number of technical quality elements, and “enters into the merits of the service”, in general terms the novice traveller tends to dwell on relational quality (Grandinetti, Paiola, 2004).

The other important variable influencing the formation of expected quality is the *awareness of service alternatives*, whether concrete or abstract.

Knowledge of concrete alternatives contributes to the raising of quality expectations. If a customer finds himself in a street full of restaurants he will seek the one that comes closest to his ideal, becoming demanding and difficult to please. If on the other hand the same person is sure that there are no alternatives to the only restaurant in the area, he will tend to modify his expectations to an acceptable low minimum level. The only alternative may be not to eat at all (Bateson, Hoffman, 2000).

For the same reason, the tourist who finds himself in a certain destination and has in fact put some time and energy into gathering information on the local accommodation offer will arrive with a very detailed set of expectations and many demands, unlike the traveller passing through who will be happy with modest accommodation.

Knowledge of alternatives in the abstract takes the customer back to past experience of the service and to different providers of such service.

In the case of a hotel guest, the accumulation of experience of stays away from home may involve a whole range of formulae, (luxury hotels, low cost, pensions, bed and breakfast and so forth), with the resulting formulation in his mind of implicit quality, or a minimum acceptable accommodation standard below which service will be regarded as being entirely unacceptable (e.g.

⁸ The concept recalls the anthropological definition of culture, which states that culture is “that complex entity including knowledge, beliefs, art, law, moral, folk costumes and traditions and any other ability or habit acquired by the man as a member of a society” (Tylor, 1871, cit. in Rossi, 1970, 7).

the fact that the bed linen at least seems clean and the courtesy set at least includes shampoo, and not just soap).

Culture and knowledge of alternatives provide fertile soil for the germination and growth of expected service, also making the customer a good customer for the business itself, since this customer will be able to appreciate the quality provided.

* * * * *

So, what do we have to do for quality?

The conceptual services quality map presented above arises from the desire to bring attention to the nature of the systemic links between customer expectations and customer behaviour on the one hand and perceptions and conduct on the other.

The starting point for the quality process is management perception about customer expectations. Management perceptions design the whole process and quality will be the more able to be expressed the more such perceptions have been able to take account of the variety of components considered by the customer at the time quality is being evaluated.

The model however is also directed towards a further need: that of obtaining a holistic vision of the process that produces quality, since quality starts and develops through the actions of the various persons employed in the various activities of the company. Through the model these persons become more able to understand the impact of their role on customer perceptions.

To achieve this the various determinants of quality need first to be expressed analytically through flow charts and blueprinting to trace the customer's path and the actions that need to be taken to respond to his needs as they emerge and interface with the organisation. A general overall view of quality determinants will certainly however facilitate an understanding of the diverse individual roles, whether played out in front office or in back office, and whether matters of coordination or operational issues.

The model may be developed further with the introduction of a suitable performance measuring system, with the proviso that measurement have a relative value in a context where quantitative methods that may not always be capable of doing full justice to the complexity of the phenomenon under examination.

It should in any case be stressed that some aspects that cannot presently be comprised within the proposed model at some future time could become the object of further study.

Two such aspects in particular recur with notable frequency in the services field, i.e. the error that is translated immediately into disservice and the incursion of the unforeseen into organisational dynamic.

These two factors that crop up in the production of service are variously linked to the actual presence of the customer at the time of the service production or provision.

The extent of the errors, whether related to the state of knowledge or the physical or emotional states of the persons concerned, may be restricted by direct action to create what could be called conditions of wellbeing within the organisation.

As regards unforeseen events, these populate the daily lives of services by virtue of the fact that their host creatures are human beings and especially the customers themselves (Baccarani, Castellani, 2006). Customers may introduce alterations to the company quality script ever time they approach the organisation and its production and provision processes.

The quality map presented here is littered with pitfalls, each well hidden and practically invisible to the organisation which may at any time fall headlong into them. It must however be able to seek out the treasure hidden there to provide the quality of performance offered to the customer.

The model has by its very nature to be adapted to the type of service being analysed, while it would be useful to clearly define the enterprise's mission, seeking to create the conditions where people are favourably inclined to move in this direction through a shared sense of the destination towards which they are travelling.

Underlying the proposed map is the assumption that it represents no more than a reference grid that ensures the necessary freedom of movement for those who populate the organisation, since each member of that organisation must be able to improvise and emerge unharmed from the traps and pitfalls that could disrupt the dynamic rhythm and harmony of the organisational performance.

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