



PERSPECTIVE ON...

Business Domains for Boosting Customer Satisfaction in Academic Libraries



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ABSTRACT

University library administrators in Sri Lanka, realising the necessity of complying with customer perception of high quality service, have begun to search for alternative ways to satisfy their clientele on the basis of service quality. This study therefore aims to meet this need by identifying business domains in the university library setting to assess the extent to which service quality domains may be used to predict customer satisfaction, from a service quality perspective. Domain identification of service quality was carried out with a sample of 262 subjects. Accordingly, seven domains—effect of service personnel, building environment, collection and access, furniture and facilities, technology, service delivery and web services—were statistically tested to be confirmed as potential business domains of service quality. Whilst not detracting from preceding research studies conducted in the field, this study has demonstrated significant implications for researchers and library administrators in understanding the importance of individual business domains within the specific service spectrum of university libraries, in order to provide ultimate satisfaction for customers with a quality library service.

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INTRODUCTION

Traditionally, the quality of an academic library has been described in terms of its collection and measured by the size of the library holdings and statistics on its use. This traditional method no longer fulfils the goals for successfully measuring the customer's demands for information. Quality is the basic philosophy and requirement of library service and all libraries strive to deliver the highest quality of service to meet the customer demand for information. A quality service is one that fully meets the expectations and requirements of the customers. If a library provides right information to the right user at the right time and in the required form facilitating access and use, then it could be argued to be maintaining quality. Quality library services mean satisfying the query of each and every user accurately, exhaustively and expeditiously (Sharma, 2001). A close perusal of business industries in the 1980s revealed that the concept of service quality had received a great deal of interest as a key strategic factor for product differentiation, and for increases in market share and profits (Bolton, Lemon, & Verhoef, 2004; Luo & Homburg, 2007; Newman & Cowling 1996, as cited in Maddern, Maull, Smart, & Baker, 2007). It also revealed that the concept of service quality is primarily based on the quality of services as perceived by customers. "When the service provider understands how the services will be evaluated by the [customers], it becomes possible to identify how to manage these evaluations and how to influence

them in a desired direction" (Grönroos, 1990). A number of researchers have reached a consensus on the fact that service quality should be defined and measured from the customer's perspective (Brown & Swartz, 1989; Schneider & White, 2004). According to Grönroos (1984), service quality is the outcome of an evaluation process, in which the customer compares his/her expectations with the service he/she perceives he/she has actually received. Parasuraman, Zeithaml, and Berry (1988, p. 15) agree with this notion, and they define it as the "overall evaluation of a specific service firm that results from comparing the firm's performance with the customer's general expectations of how firms in that industry should perform."

The concept of service quality closely relates to customer satisfaction (Brady, Cronin, & Brand, 2002; Herson & Altman, 1998). Oliver (1997, p. 13) defined customer satisfaction as the customer's fulfilment of response. "It is the judgement that a product or service feature, or the product or service itself, provided (or is providing) a pleasurable level of consumption related fulfilment, including levels of under or over fulfilment." In particular, academicians and practitioners alike have exhibited considerable interest in the issues that surround the measurement of service quality and the conceptualisation of the relationship between service quality and customer satisfaction (Brady et al., 2002). A number of researchers—such as Herson and Altman (1998), Iacobucci, Ostrom, and Grayson (1995), and Zeithaml, Berry, and Parasuraman (1993)—have clearly articulated the fact that customer satisfaction is a function of service quality.

$$CS = f(SQ).$$

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Here, customer satisfaction (CS) is a function of service quality (SQ) (Hernon & Altman, 1998, p. 36; Iacobucci et al., 1995, p. 277; Zeithaml et al., 1993, p. 2–3).

To strive towards the improvement of the services of libraries, and identifying appropriate criteria for evaluating the quality of services rendered to customers is essential. The assessment of service quality provides an important feedback for libraries to assess and improve the service provided to its customers. Filiz (2007, p. 9) says:

The survival of a library very much depends on the benefits it brings to customers. Its existence will be in question when customers begin looking for alternatives to library services. One way to show value is by providing quality service. It is therefore important for the library to be aware of changing customer expectations, and to continually strive to provide quality service to its customers.

As cited by Cullen (2001), it was Hernon and Altman (1996) who introduced the idea of “customer satisfaction” in libraries. According to them, service quality in higher education libraries is usually associated with the question of customer satisfaction, which in turn is based on customer perceptions of service quality. Cullen (2001) further cites Elliot (1995), who also makes use of this term and defines customer satisfaction as the emotional reaction to a specific transaction or service encounter. She points out that satisfaction may or may not be directly related to the performance of the library on a specific occasion. Customers can receive an answer to a query, but be dissatisfied because of an upsetting or angry service provider. Conversely, even if the query might remain unanswered, another customer might feel satisfied because the service provider was pleasant, and the helper was interested and courteous.

Administrators in the libraries of the Sri Lankan universities are left to ponder ways and means of satisfying patrons and providing good quality service that meets customers' perceptions.¹ The different indicators of service quality in the university library sector are not always understood. There are currently 33 libraries attached to 17 national universities, seven postgraduate institutions and nine other higher education institutes. University libraries in Sri Lanka are managed within the framework of the Universities Act No. 16 of 1978. Each national university and higher education institute has a library, which is considered as one of the main departments in that university.

The basic profiles of some university libraries in Sri Lanka are given in Table 1.

As illustrated in Table 1, the University of Colombo ranks best in all aspects of the profile compared to the other selected university libraries in Sri Lanka. The infrastructure facilities of libraries play a very important role in providing services to their customers. Table 1 provides an overview of the infrastructural facilities available in these selected libraries, and it appears that both conventional and contemporary facilities are available in all of them. It is also observed that all the selected libraries in Sri Lanka provide traditional library services to the customer community, such as lending, reference, periodical information services, inter-library loans and other services, whilst also providing emerging technology-based services, such as e-Journals, e-books, Web OPACs, e-Mail, Internet and other allied services. Electronic media are becoming very popular within university libraries and are currently sought by a large number of customers (Damayanthi, 2006). The services provided vary from one library to another, owing to a whole range of interests of the customer community. By providing information services to customers, a university library is able to fulfil its aims and objectives in relation to the promotion of advanced learning and research.

SERVICE QUALITY AND CUSTOMER SATISFACTION IN UNIVERSITY LIBRARIES

Even though a range of information and customer services is available in all libraries, Silva (1995) says that the image of university libraries in Sri Lanka is weak because they have failed to meet customer expectations of library services, in spite of the increased resources/services made available. He further articulates that the reason could be the lack of adequate funds provided by the government, as all the universities in Sri Lanka are government-owned. However, Nanayakkara (2008) states that the quality of library materials and services in university libraries are of a reasonably good standard from the library customers' points of view. However, until recently, university libraries did not engage in the marketing of their services, offering knowledge and facilitating access to knowledge to different market segments governed by the market forces of supply and demand. Consequently, university libraries and their services have a low status and are undervalued, a situation made more complex by the fact that benefits for customers derived from library services are difficult to measure and, hence, to manage.

The competitive position of university libraries in Sri Lanka is further complicated by the fact that, unlike many of their competitors—such as the libraries attached to non-governmental agencies, foreign missions, book sellers, and so on—they are financed by the state. In reviewing the financial statements of university libraries, the problems pertaining to state funding include shortage of funding, failure to fund at the proper time so that the orders—particularly for printed and electronic periodicals—cannot be placed, and sometimes, non-allocation of funds for the financial year (University of Colombo Annual Report, 2003). On the other hand, some state authorities question the worthiness of allocating significant amounts of money for libraries instead of allocating those funds for development activities in the country. Therefore, in many ways, public opinion makers characterise the libraries as “white elephants,”² although those segments of society who are responsible for libraries argue in favour of their social importance. As education is free at all levels in Sri Lanka except the postgraduate level, the value of free library services is low and of little significance. In developed market economies, education services often have to be paid for directly by students, whose expectations of library services are consequently higher than those held by students paying indirectly through taxes (Broady-Preston & Preston, 1999, p. 126).

In Sri Lanka, quality of university library services is still measured by statistics that are reported annually to the university administration in the form of funds spent on collection development, number of professional librarians employed, number of customers (external and internal) that utilised the service and the queries answered by librarians. Nicholas (1996, p. 7) argues that these measures need to be changed because the success or effectiveness of a library can be determined only through customer satisfaction. Continuous interaction between library customers and information providers is essential for developing a better understanding of the informational needs of customers, acceptance and use of library collections, services and facilities, and their opinions on the utility of various information sources. Such feedback is necessary for conceptualisation, planning, and implementation of information systems and services for an institution (Verhoeven, Boerman, & Jong, 1995).

Although the definition and modelling of service quality are generally acknowledged to be more difficult than modelling the quality of goods because of the intangible nature of services (Bergman & Klefsjö, 1994, as cited in Hofman & Worsfold, 1996), there are two popular service quality models that are being used worldwide to measure service quality in different sectors. These are SERVQUAL and SURVPREF. Since the 1990s, many researchers have tried to use SERVQUAL to measure library service quality in different settings, but failed to produce reliable

¹ The idea was presented at the Quality Assurance Workshop conducted by the QAA Council, Sri Lanka held on 24–25 May, 2007.

² The term white elephant is used to denote an enormously valuable possession, but whose usefulness is exceedingly diminutive compared to its upkeep expenses. Thus, it is a liability.

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