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Letter to the Editor: What is so Different about Service Quality Research? Reply to Dr. John Liefeld

By Chuck Chakrapani

Professor Liefeld's comments (Imprints, Feb. '91) on my article "What is so Different About Service Quality Research?" are both interesting and valid. I generally agree with his observations. It seems to me that:

1. Many of Dr. Liefeld's comments have more to do with my inelegant exposition rather than a differing point of view.
2. Dr. Liefeld gives me greater credit than I deserve for rigorous exposition. I intended the series to be informal discussions rather than rigorous theoretical discourse.

On rating scales: I do not dispute that "semantic ratings applied to products experience the same effects as those for services". I acknowledged this explicitly, later in the article, when I stated "Certainly if all **products** are equally unsatisfactory, there will be regression towards the mean." I did not intend to draw a narrow distinction between products and services in this regard. The real distinction I was drawing between products and services was that **products can be improved independently of consumers** while improvement of a service, without reference to customers, is difficult and, in many cases, even impossible. For example, if a car gives 30 mpg and consumers are satisfied, the manufacturer can still make the car give 33 mpg; or, if the sweetness level of a chocolate is acceptable to consumers, the manufacturer can still make it less (or more) sweet. On the other hand, if customers are already happy with the politeness of the employees it is really difficult for the organization to make the employees 10% more polite than they already are; if the employees are perceived to be competent, it is difficult to see how they can be made even more competent without reference to customers. Even if we could do this, we will not know whether we have achieved what we have set out to achieve unless customers perceive the way we expect them to. In other words, when we improve a product, we know we have improved it: a car that gives 33 mpg is indeed different from a car that gives 30 mpg (whether consumers appreciate it or not). On the other hand, politeness is not politeness unless customers perceive it to be so; 'improved politeness' may well be perceived as obsequiousness or insincerity. 'Regression towards the mean' has more serious implications for services than for products. This is the rationale for my distinction between product and service research.

On 'regression towards the mean':

While I borrowed the term from geneticists and statisticians, I do not use it in the technical sense. All I meant was that in the absence of knowledge, a respondent's rating tends to regress towards his or her mean for other attributes (the mental anchoring of a midpoint), or even to the midpoint of the scale. If my use of the terms causes any confusion, I am more than willing to go back to 'Perception Limited to Current Framework'.

On the independence of 'factors':

The three factors I identified are not meant to be independent from a theoretical point of view. Rather, they are useful distinctions from a research point of view. My point about 'regression towards the mean' (the first factor) deals with a known scale, whose ratings are 'distorted' (a 'quantitative distortion'). My point about 'consumer perceptions being limited by current framework' (the third factor) deals with the inability of the respondent to go beyond the current framework in a qualitative sense. Although, as Dr. Liefeld correctly points out, the dynamics that give rise to both are the same, the distinction is an important and useful one when considering research methodologies.

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