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Service Quality Research - 15

A Summary of Research and Analytical Techniques

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Summarizing the Techniques

In the past several articles we discussed a number of techniques that can be used in service quality research. The following two pages summarize several useful research and analytical techniques that may be used in service quality research. There are several other techniques of course. The summary is essentially confined to the techniques we have discussed so far. I have also mentioned some other techniques not discussed in this series. For the sake of completeness, here is a brief description of the techniques mentioned on the chart but not discussed so far.

Generating Ideas: Brain Storming

Brain storming is a widely-known technique used to generate new ideas. The process consists of getting a group of people who are involved in the issue of interest to simply generate ideas, without any critical appraisal of the ideas generated. The basic assumption is that the lack of critical appraisal is likely to generate ideas that might otherwise have been suppressed because they are not considered 'reasonable'.

Force Field Analysis (An Example)

Should we have more counter personnel

Driving Forces			Opposing Forces
Customer can be served better	->	<-	Expense
We can attract more new customers	->	<-	We can't serve them
Employees will be less stressed during peak hours	->	<-	Not enough work in off-peak hours
We can retain customers	->	<-	Not enough office space

Understanding How the Customer Feels: Mystery Shopping by Senior Management

Quite often management is unaware of the problems faced by customers. To really understand how the average customer feels, senior executives may want to pose as customers and note what problems they face in a typical situation. The problem with this approach is that it often degenerates into an evaluation of a specific employee, which may be unfair to the person involved since it may not be a proper sampling of the employee's work. However, used with clear objectives in mind, this technique can be useful as it provides senior executives with first hand knowledge of the customer's situation.

THE PROBLEM	TECHNIQUE
Customers can only articulate the System (PDS) negative aspects of service quality	Problem Detection
How to understand what customers really mean by poor quality service?	Laddering
How to deliver the unexpected?	Laddering
How to eliminate prior expectations in observing service procedures?	Deleting dimensionality (eg. use of cameras)
How to understand the interconnectedness of service quality attributes?	Factor analysis
How to elicit and analyse customer complaints?	Content tracking and Run Charts Pareto charts Belief system analysis
How to translate research into action?	The Fishbone diagram (Ishikawa chart)
How to understand overall customer expectations regarding service quality?	Control Charts
How to generate ideas to improve service quality?	Focus groups Depth interviews
How to understand barriers to change?	Brain storming
How to understand driving forces?	Force field analysis
How to convert customer information into preliminary performance target measures?	Nominal group technique
How to track the interconnectedness of different activities?	Process mapping Process evaluation
How to find out where the breakdown occurs in a system?	Run chart
How to find out how the customer really feels?	Management mystery shopping

There are several other research and analytical techniques that can be used in service quality research. The above techniques are a fair representation of some of the more useful approaches.

Understanding the Barriers to Change: Force Field Analysis

Force field analysis is aimed at understanding the forces that lead an organization towards change and the forces that oppose the change. To carry out force field analysis:

1. Define the current problem.
2. State the desired goal.
3. Identify the forces that drive and restrain the achievement of the goal. (This can be done through brain storming, or other techniques and can be formalized through a fishbone diagram.)
4. Present this analysis to the decision-makers so a consensus can be reached as to the main restraining forces.

Such consensus is necessary so that programmes can be created to counter the forces that hinder change.

Giving Equal Time: Nominal Group Technique

The Nominal Group Technique can be thought of as a rigorously structured brainstorming. To use this technique, a group is gathered and the following procedure is followed:

1. Identify in writing-preferably as a question-the problem to be solved.
2. Ask the group members to write down their answers to the question. They should provide their most important ideas.
3. Each person responds with his or her idea(s). Ideas are written out on a blackboard (or flip charts) such that the ideas are in full view of every group member.
4. Eliminate duplicate ideas and merge similar ideas.
5. As in brainstorming, critical evaluation of ideas is avoided.
6. Ask all group members to copy all ideas in a worksheet.
7. Ask group members to rank the ideas in order of importance.
8. Collect all the ranks and average them.
9. If some ranks are diametrically opposed (eg. the same idea ranked as number 1 by some and number 15 by others), assess the reasons for this.
- 10 Arrive at a overall ranking of the solutions.

The main advantage of the nominal group technique is that it avoids a senior or the most vocal group member dominating the group. By giving every group member an equal opportunity to participate in arriving at a solution, the technique is likely to arrive at a balanced solution or even a solution that would not have been voiced at all.

This technique differs from brainstorming only in that the nominal group technique is much more formalized and is structured so that all participants - no matter how vocal - provide ideas.

Where and Why Breakdowns Occur: Process Mapping and Process Evaluation

Process mapping and evaluation involves simply following a transaction to understand where inefficiencies and problems occur. In the example (see chart), four points of delay are identified. By following a number of transactions and analysing them logically, one could identify recurring patterns that contribute most to inefficiencies in the system.

How a Transaction is processed (Process Mapping and Process Evaluation)

1. Customer presents a cheque	
2. Account is checked on a computer	-> Terminal sometimes not immediately available
3. Cheque is presented	-> Sometimes an officer is not readily available
4. Customer presents a large number of cheques for deposit	-> Large number of deposits delay other customers
5. The total deposit amount should be input into the computer again	-> Terminal sometimes not immediately available

Tracking Over Time: Run Charts

Run charts are simply charts that track performance over a period of time. For example, if a system is

implemented to shorten the time it takes to service a customer, the time taken to service customers can be tracked over time on a graph. Such a run chart would visually identify the improvements.

Run charts are also useful in identifying variability in performance. For instance, the new system may decrease the average time to process a customer but may make performance more volatile. This is an important characteristic of service quality and a run chart will identify differences in variability fairly quickly.

Do customers care about the service rendered? Even if they don't, improvement in performance would realize more profit ... and improve service to customers.

W.E. Deming

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