Identifying the Gaps between Customer Expectations and Perceptions on Service Quality Dimensions of XYZ Fitness
การวิเคราะห์ความคาดหวังและการรับรู้คุณภาพด้านบริการ ให้แก่สมาชิกของ XYZ Fitness

Pithoon Thanabordeekij[*]

International College, Panyapiwat Institute of Management
[*]e-mail: pithoontha@pim.ac.th

พิฑูร ธนบดีกิจ
วิทยาลัยนานาชาติ สถาบันการจัดการปัญญาภิวัฒน์

Abstract

The main objectives of the study are (1) to identify the difference between customer expectations and perceptions on service quality of XYZ Fitness based on five dimensions of SERVQUAL model and (2) to determine the relative importance attributed to five dimension of SERVQUAL model. The methodology involved the compilation of a literature review and conducting both qualitative and quantitative approaches. Five dimensions of the SERVQUAL have been employed using a data of 390 members. The research data were analyzed using frequency, percentage, mean, standard deviation, reliability analysis, and paired t-test. This study found that members' perceptions were greater than members' expectations in staff knowledge and skills, eagerness to listen and solve the problem, and appearance at statistically significant level of .01. On the contrary, member perceptions was lower than member expectation toward equipment, design of facilities, timeliness in handling member problems, and individual attention at statistically significant level of .01. The result of this study would enable management to identify service quality dimensions that needed to be improved with the intention of enhancing their members' satisfaction.

Keywords: Service Quality, Customer Expectations, Customer Perceptions, Customer Satisfactions

บทคัดย่อ

การวิจัยนี้มีวัตถุประสงค์เพื่อศึกษาความคาดหวังและการรับรู้จริงต่อคุณภาพการให้บริการแก่สมาชิก ของ XYZ Fitness โดยวัดจากคุณภาพบริการห้าด้านตามตัวแบบ SERVQUAL สำหรับวิธีการในการวิจัยนั้นประกอบไปด้วยการศึกษาและทบทวนวรรณกรรม รวมถึงการทำวิจัยทั้งแบบเชิงประมาณและเชิงคุณภาพ กลุ่มตัวอย่างที่ใช้ในการวิเคราะห์คุณภาพบริการทั้งห้าด้าน มีจำนวนทั้งหมด 390 คน ข้อมูลที่ได้นั้นจะนำมาวิเคราะห์โดยใช้สถิติต่าง ๆ ได้แก่ ค่าความถี่ ค่าร้อยละ ค่าเฉลี่ย ค่าเบี่ยงเบนมาตรฐาน การวิเคราะห์หาความเชื่อมั่น และ การทดสอบ Paired t-test

จากผลการศึกษาพบว่า ความรับรู้จริงของสมาชิกมีมากกว่าความคาดหวัง ทางด้านความรู้และทักษะของพนักงาน ความกระตือรือร้นในการฟังและแก้ไขปัญหา ลักษณะภายนอกของพนักงาน อย่างมีนัยสำคัญทางสถิติที่ระดับ .01 ในทางตรงกันข้ามความรับรู้จริงของสมาชิกมีน้อยกว่าความคาดหวัง ทางด้านอุปกรณ์ออกกำลังกาย การตกแต่งสถานที่ ความรวดเร็วในการแก้ปัญหา ความเอาใจใส่ของพนักงานต่อสมาชิก อย่างมีนัยสำคัญทางสถิติที่ระดับ .01 ผลลัพธ์ที่ได้จากการวิจัยนี้จะช่วยให้ผู้บริหาร XYZ Fitness ทราบถึงมิติด้านคุณภาพการบริการที่ต้องปรับปรุงเพื่อเพิ่มความพึงพอใจของสมาชิกต่อไป

คำสำคัญ: คุณภาพการบริการ ความคาดหวังของผู้บริโภค การรับรู้ของผู้บริโภค ความพึงพอใจของผู้บริโภค

Introduction

The current need of Thai society to experience the benefits of exercise has led to a recent surge in the health and fitness businesses in Thailand. Health and Fitness is one of the fast growing sectors of the economy. According to the record of National Statistics Office of Thailand, Thai population at age of 15 to 59 years old has significantly increased in working out from 2% in 2007 to 16% in 2011. The market size of the fitness industry has witnessed nearly hundred percent growths in last decade. It rose from 5.6 billion Baht in 2006 (Positioning, 2008) to an estimate of 10 billion Baht in 2017 (Prachachatturakij, 2016). Major Chain brands enjoyed about 80 to 90 % of market value and the rest are possessed by local brands (Manager Online, 2016). There are three major chain brands in the market, namely, Fitness First, Virgin Active, and WE Fitness Society.

In this highly competitive market, customers' satisfaction becomes an essential factor in marketing. If fitness providers failed to meet customer needs, it will be problematic in this service-oriented market. Providers need to deliver the best service to members in order to gain satisfaction. Customer satisfaction can be measured by employing an instrument called "SERVQUAL" (Parasuraman, Zeithamal & Berry, 1985). The SERVQUAL instrument is practical for exploring customers' satisfaction in the service industry. The opinions from customers will be the best source of information for service enhancement.

Successful service quality strategies have been found essential to attract customer and create customer loyalty (Porter, 1980; Porter, 1985). By knowing what customers prefer, company can offer its customers exactly what they want by customizing the product or service to delight them (Porter, 1980; Albrecht, 1992). In order to offer the optimal levels of customer service, company has accurately assessing customer expectations and be able to deliver highly-valued customer expectations (Evelyn & DeCarlo, 1992; Miller, 1992; Peters & Waterman, 1982; Peters & Austin, 1985; Sonnerberg, 1991).

Research objectives

1. To identify the gaps and differences between customer expectations and perceptions on service quality of XYZ Fitness based on five dimensions of SERVQUAL model.

2. To determine the relative importance attributed to five dimensions of SERVQUAL.

Literature review
Service Quality

Perceived quality is defined as the

customer's evaluation about a product's entire superiority or excellence (Zeithaml, 1988; Aaker & Jacobson, 1994). The recent literature of this decade suggest that perceived quality is not the real quality of the product or brand, rather, it is a consequence of consumers' subjective judgment about a product's or a service's overall performance (Parasuraman, et al., (1985); Cronin & Taylor (1992). Service quality is also regarded as the customer's impression of the relative inferiority or superiority of a service provider and its services (Bitner & Hubbert, 1994; Tsoukatos & Rand, 2006). Some researchers believe that service quality is the difference between customer expectations and perception of services (Grönroos, 1984, 1990; Oliver, 1980; Parasuraman, et at, 1985; Parasuraman Zeithamal & Berry, 1991; Parasuraman, Zeithamal & Berry, 1994). Others suggested that the difference could be measured through difference scores which calculated from both expectation and perception by researchers (Parasunaman, et al., 1985; Parasunaman, et al., 1991; Parasunaman, et al., 1994).

The SERVQUAL Model

The ten dimensions of service quality were suggested by Parasuraman, et al., (1985). Later in 1991; Parasuraman, et al., (1985) introduced the well-known five dimensions in the SERVQUAL model. Five key dimensions of service quality have been dominated in fitness industry and will be characterized briefly and listed in the followings: (Babakus & Boller, 1992; Brown, Churchill & Peter, 1993; Chelladurai, Scott & Haywood-Farmer, 1987;; Kim & Kim, 1995; Lam, Zhang & Jensen, 2005; Papadimitrious & Karteroliotis, 2000; Parasuraman, et. al, 1988; Parasuraman, Zeithaml, & Berry, 1985; Park, Robertson, & Wu, 2004; Zeithaml, et al, 2006).

1) Tangibles are the dimension that refers to the physical facilities, equipment, appearance of staff, and communication materials in service process. For fitness industry, these variables include modern equipment, well designed club, neat and well-dressed staffs, and variety of class exercises.

2) Responsiveness can be defined as the willingness to provide timely and efficient service for customers. This dimension is associated with the employees' ability and attitude for solving requests, questions, and complaints of member promptly and attentively.

3) Reliability is related to the ability to deliver service dependably and accurately. Reliability of XYZ Fitness involves on time performance, dependable service, understand members need, and keep accurate records of their members.

4) Assurance could be explained by the ability of conveying trust and confidence to members, such as knowledge and competences to answer questions. This dimension means member can perceive courtesy and credibility of staffs.

5) Empathy is associated with the treatment that is individualized care and attention provided to members, such as personalized attention, staff understand needs of members. Empathy is regarded a very important factor in competitive market of fitness providers.

Gaps in Service

A good example of a standardized framework for understanding service quality is the SERVQUAL model developed by Parasuraman, et al., (1985). Most researchers suggest the SERVQUAL as a common model to measure perceived service quality (Augustyn & Seakhoa-King, 2004; Chen & Chang, 2005; Pakdil & Aydın, 2007; Philip & Hazlett, 1997). The SERVQUAL model focuses on five gaps: (1) Gap between expectation of client and perception of management; (2) Gap between perception of management and service quality specification; (3) Gap between specification of quality and delivery of service; (4) Gap between the delivery of service and external communication; and (5) Gap between perceived

and expected service. This study focuses on Gap 5: the difference between customer expectations and perceptions of the services. This is the only Gap that can be studied exclusively on customer. The information on both customer expectations and perceptions of the service can be measured and analyzed. By narrowing this gap, customer satisfactions can be achieved and led to high retention with the service provider.

Methodology

Quantitative approach was used in this study. The target populations of this study were the members of XYZ Fitness. Convenience sampling method was employed. Six hundred questionnaires were distributed to members of XYZ Fitness. Respondents were purposively asked to fill the survey in the presence of a researcher who provided explanations and information if necessary. All questionnaires were anonymous in order to obtain possibly the most spontaneous and valid answers. One hundred and ten of the questionnaires were excluded due to incomplete or not suitable for use, resulting in a total of 390 useable responses.

The questionnaire for the main study contains two parts, which were research framework section with five variables measuring customer perception and seven items in demographic information section. In research framework part, a total of 20 scaled items were used to measure the five variables (four items for each dimension: tangibility, reliability, responsiveness, assurance, and empathy). The measuring scale was five-point Likert response scale, ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree). Also, the researcher employed the process of back-translation for the questionnaire. The questionnaire was translated from English to Thai and Thai to English by professional translators to ensure the accuracy of the survey.

Table 1: Composition of Questionnaire

Items		Supporting References
Tangible (TAN)		
<u>Expectation</u> TAN1: Excellent sport club will have modern equipment. TAN2: Excellent sport club will provide a variety of class exercises. TAN3: The physical facilities at excellent sport club will be visually appealing. TAN4: Employees at excellent sport club will be neat appealing.	<u>Perception</u> TAN1: XYZ Fitness has modern equipment. TAN2: XYZ Fitness provides a variety of class exercises. TAN3: The design of XYZ Fitness facilities are striking. TAN4: Employees of XYZ Fitness are neat appealing.	Parasuraman, et al., (1985) Zeithmal, et al., (1990) Javadein & Estiri (2010) Murray & Howat (2012)
Responsiveness (RES)		
<u>Expectation</u> RES1: Employees in excellent company will handle customer problems immediately. RES2: Employee in excellent company will listen and solve problems. RES3: Employee in excellent company will pay attention to customer concerns and understands customer problems.	<u>Perception</u> RES1: XYZ Fitness Employees handle your problems immediately. RES2: XYZ Fitness Employees are eager to listen and solve problems. RES3: XYZ Fitness employees pay attention to your concerns and understand your problems.	

RES4: Employee in excellent company will never be too busy to respond to customer requests.	RES4: XYZ Fitness employees have never be too busy to respond to your requests.	
Reliability (REL)		
<u>Expectation</u>	<u>Perception</u>	
REL1: When excellent company promised to do something by a certain time, they will do so. REL2: When a customer has a problem, excellent company shows a sincere interest in solving it. REL3: Excellent company is reliable in providing service to members. REL4: Excellent company will insist on error-free records.	REL1: XYZ Fitness counselors always stick to their words and serve you based on the special offers on the application date. REL2: When you have a problem, XYZ Fitness staffs show a sincere interest on solving it. REL3: XYZ Fitness staffs are reliable in providing service to member. REL4: XYZ Fitness keeps members' record accurately.	
Assurance (ASR)		
<u>Expectation</u>	<u>Perception</u>	
ASR1: Employees in excellent company will be consistently courteous with customers. ASR2: Employee in excellent company will have knowledge to answer customer's questions. ASR3: The behavior of employees in excellent company will instill confidence in customers. ASR4: Customers of excellent company will feel safe in their transaction.	ASR1: XYZ Fitness staffs are consistently courteous. ASR2: XYZ Fitness staffs have knowledge, capability, and skill in their job responsibilities. ASR3: Class instructors are always aware of members' safety while class exercises are being conducted. ASR4: You will safe while attending class exercises under class instructor's supervision.	

Empathy (EMP)		
<u>Expectation</u>	<u>Perception</u>	
EMP1: Excellent company will give customers individual attention. EMP2: Excellent company has operating hours convenient to all their customers. EMP3: Excellent company will have employees who give customers personal attention. EMP4: The employees of excellent company will understand the specific needs of their customers.	EMP1: XYZ Fitness give you personalized attention while providing services. EMP2: XYZ Fitness has operation hours convenient to all their customers. EMP3: XYZ Fitness has staffs who give member personal attention. EMP4: XYZ Fitness staffs understand the specific needs of their customers	

Table 2 Cronbach's Alpha Scale Reliability Results

Variables	Number of items	Cronbach's alpha Pre-test: Expectation n = 30	Cronbach's alpha Pre-test: Perception n = 30	Cronbach's alpha Expectation n = 390	Cronbach's alpha (Perception) n = 390
Tangible	4	0.870	0.916	0.843	0.870
Responsiveness	4	0.910	0.892	0.909	0.895
Reliability	4	0.868	0.851	0.809	0.825
Assurance	4	0.883	0.902	0.843	0.884
Empathy	4	0.861	0.898	0.874	0.888

Source: [Fieldwork, 2017].

In this study, a pilot test was conducted among 30 members of XYZ Fitness in order to test the validity of the instrument. There was no specific sample size for most pilot tests in survey researches; a series of researches considered sample size from 10 to 25 (Sheatsley, 1983) or 20 to 50 (Sudman, 1976). The formal questionnaire of this study was produced after a pre-test and some preliminary interviews with members were undertaken. The research apply Cronbach's alpha to test reliability scale. The Table 1 shows that Cronbach's alpha values are from 0.809 to 0.916. Many previous studies suggest that Cronbach's alpha values must be above 0.7 and could prove the scales have internal consistency (DeVellis, 2012; Hair, Black, Babin & Anderson, 2009; Kline, 2015). Thus, all constructs of this study were accepted for internal consistency.

Results of the Study

The socio-economic background comprises gender, age, monthly income, occupation, education, membership duration, and exercise frequency per week. The collected sample consists of 48.5% males and 51.5% females, which is considered equally distributed in gender; majority of respondents, 43.30%, are between 18 and 30 years old, 23.80% are in range of 31 to 40 years old, 17.70% are in range of 41 to 50 years old, and 15.10% are over 50 years old; 22.30% of the respondents earn less than 25,000 THB, 41.50% of respondents earn 25,001 to 45,000 THB, and 36.20% of respondents earn more than 45,000 THB; 13.10% of the respondents are students, 14.9% are government officers, 44.90% are private sector employee, 21.50% are business owners, and 5.60% of respondents are engaged in other works; more than 90% of the respondents have at least Bachelor's degree; 45.10% of respondents are the member of XYZ Fitness for at least 2 years; 52.10% of respondents exercise 4 to 6 times per week, 43.30% of respondents exercise 1 to 3 times per week, and only 4.60% of respondents exercise more than 6 times per week.

Table 3 Paired sample t-test of service quality

SERVQUAL factor	Mean (expectation)	Mean (perception)	Gap (p-e)	t-test	Sig.
Tangible	*3.662*	*3.543*	*-0.119*	*3.717*	*0.000*[*]
TAN1	3.544	3.408	-0.136	3.477	0.001[*]
TAN2	3.546	3.449	-0.097	2.557	0.011[**]
TAN3	3.767	3.636	-0.131	3.232	0.001[*]
TAN4	3.679	3.792	0.113	2.819	0.005[*]

Responsiveness	3.600		3.558		-0.042		2.820		0.005*
RES1		3.864		3.772		0.005		1.948	0.050**
RES2		3.726		3.592		0.008		2.829	0.005*
RES3		3.692		3.577		-0.031		2.396	0.017**
RES4		3.482		3.367		-0.149		2.570	0.011**
Reliability	3.691		3.577		-0.114		2.820		0.005*
REL1		3.351		3.356		-0.092		-0.127	0.899
REL2		3.505		3.513		-0.134		-0.178	0.859
REL3		3.641		3.610		-0.115		0.730	0.465
REL4		3.903		3.754		-0.115		3.792	0.000*
Assurance	3.577		3.593		0.016		-0.359		0.719
ASR1		3.518		3.753		0.235		-3.936	0.000*
ASR2		3.644		3.590		-0.054		0.886	0.376
ASR3		3.679		3.627		-0.052		0.809	0.419
ASR4		3.467		3.403		-0.064		1.091	0.276
Empathy	3.736		3.669		-0.067		1.968		0.050**
EMP1		3.744		3.618		-0.126		2.941	0.003*
EMP2		3.695		3.672		-0.023		0.570	0.569
EMP3		3.769		3.718		-0.051		1.271	0.204
EMP4		3.738		3.669		-0.069		1.650	0.100
Note: * α: P < .01, ** α: P < .05									

Source: [Fieldwork, 2017]

The Analysis of Service Quality Gap

Table 2 exhibits the means scores of customer expectations and perceptions on SERVEQUAL model. The mean scores of the items ranged from 3.35 to 3.90 for expectation and 3.35 to 3.77 for perceptions. The results indicated that the highest gaps were in between customer expectations and perceptions on "Tangible" dimension, whereas the lowest gaps were on "Responsiveness" dimension. However, the customer perceptions were higher than expectations on "Assurance" dimension as the gaps showed a positive value of 0.016. The gaps were tested by paired samples t-test and the results were presented in Table 3. Based on the results shown in Table 3, the researcher separated the service factors into three types of gap, as suggested by (Chang & Chang, 2009), to measure members' satisfaction as follow (1) indifference quality, (2) ideal quality, and (3) undesirable quality.

Table 4 Service Quality Gap for XYZ Fitness

Service Quality Gap	Key Service Items of XYZ Fitness
Indifference Quality Gap (Expectation = Perception)	REL1, REL2, REL3, ASR2, ASR3, ASR4, EMP2, EMP3, EMP4
Ideal Quality Gap (Expectation < Perception)	RES1, RES2, ASR1, TAN4
Undesirable Quality Gap (Expectation > Perception)	TAN1, TAN2, TAN3, RES3, RES4, REL4, EMP1

According to ideal quality gap, there were four service items that XZY Fitness should continue to maintain its service level. As one of the member told this researcher that "What I like about XYZ is that staffs are willing to listen and promptly react to my request. For example, I expressed my concern about broken hair dryer in the bathroom to the customer service staff. I found out that they were quickly replacing it". "Staffs are knowledgeable to answer the questions I have

such as I have been trying to slim my muscular calves for quite sometimes. One of trainer suggested to me proper excises to achieve my goal within three months" commented by one of the member. "I really like the design of staff outfit especially colors theme. Staffs really look great on their uniform" as mentioned by one of the members.

There were seven unacceptable service items as indicated in undesirable quality gap which borders on equipment, class exercise, design of facility, availability of staff in serving members, timeliness in serving members, accuracy in keeping members' record, and individual service. One of the members told this researcher that "I like to do cardio work out, mostly on spinning bike. The equipment is up for par but I really like to have a modernized equipment i.e. exercise monitoring system, smart phone connecting port, and etc." "A special class exercise is quite in demand and requires advance registration. There was a time that I was registered for the class but my name wasn't showed up." as mentioned by one member. Therefore, these service items need to be improved upon for member satisfactions.

Last but not least, the service items of indifferent quality gap were those that were insignificant after statistical analysis. However, XYZ Fitness should closely observe and improve service quality in pursuance of satisfy the members.

Implication and Conclusion

The main goal of the study was to (1) identify the gaps and differences between customer expectations and perceptions on service quality of XYZ Fitness; (2) determine the relative importance attributed to five dimensions of SERVQUAL (tangible, responsiveness, reliability, assurance, empathy) proposed by Parasuraman, et al., (1985). The gaps of service quality items were separated into three types, namely, (1) indifferent satisfactory gap, (2) ideal quality gap, and (3) undesirable quality gap. This study found that there were four service items in the ideal quality gap (member perception is significantly greater that expectation). The result suggests management of XYZ Fitness has to continue with current service levels to maintain members' satisfaction.

There were seven service quality items fall into "unacceptable quality gap" which were equipment, class exercise, design of facility, availability of staffs in serving member, timeliness in serving members, accuracy in keeping members' records, and individual services. These items need to be improved in the interest of managements to enhance members' satisfaction. With the intention of improving this gap, the management has to:

● Upgrade the equipment annually due to the changing technological innovation in Fitness industry in order to keep up with competitors, as well as equipment maintenance and upkeep.

● The offerings of special class exercises are inadequate to the customers' demands; therefore, there should be an increase in number of class offerings.

● Changing of seasonal decoration in the facilities to stimulate motivational enthusiasm for customers to exercise.

● To meet the demand of customer service, there should be an increase in staff availability, especially during peak hours.

● To improve the timeliness in customer service, therefore staffs should be efficient. In order to staff to be efficient, there should be training programs suitable for staff' skills development.

● As for the maintaining accuracy in keeping members' records and individual services, there should be implementable and reliable database systems.

For service quality items that were in "indifferent satisfactory gap", it could be an opportunity for management to enhance members' satisfaction by improving these service quality items.

Overall in determining optimum levels of customer service depends on accurately assessing customer perceptions. XYZ Fitness can maintain their highly-valued customer perceptions and improve employing those services that customers do not value. The result of this study would enable management of XYZ Fitness to identify service quality dimensions influencing their members' satisfaction. This useful information could be used to improve service and design better customer service strategies, possibly making XYZ Fitness more competitive in the industry.

The findings in this study also make a contribution to the present literature on services, in particular, the literature on fitness industry. In future, further researches should attempt to modify the instrument to obtain better understanding of service quality in fitness and related industries.

Acknowledgements

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