

Customer Perceptions of Service Quality at Small Medium Micro Enterprises (SMME): The Case of Crossley Holdings, Durban South Africa

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ABSTRACT This study measures customers' expectations and perceptions of service quality using the SERVQUAL model. It focuses on a Small Medium Micro Enterprise (SMME) called Crossley Holdings in Carpet supply in Durban, South Africa. The paper attempts to assess the difference between customers' expectations and perceptions in all five dimensions of the service quality model. The study population consisted of 89 Crossley Holdings customers as research respondents. The authors of this paper utilized both a qualitative and quantitative research methods and analyzed the data using the Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS). The findings of this study help SMMEs to better understand customer needs in terms of service quality and in order to retain current clientele and attracting new clientele. The findings from this study can be adopted by service providers operating in a similar environments and assist them in meeting the expectations of their customers.

INTRODUCTION

Nowadays, organizations are facing growth challenges from global competition and more sophisticated customers in terms of what they want and their changing needs. The ever-increasing global competitive nature of the business environment has forced companies to develop strategies to become low cost producers and to differentiate their goods and services from their competition. Through customer-focused quality programmes, quality lowers the cost and will become a powerful product differentiation to customers (Ajayi 2013; Olusanya and Adegbola 2014). Many scholars and practitioners remain focused on understanding why some firms outplay others. There are arguments that organizations can generate sustained competitive advantage through a continuous stream of innovation and ability to leverage other capabilities of the firm (Ndubisi and Agarwal 2014).

With the South African economy steadily growing and penetrating the global arena, it has become increasingly difficult for organisations to maintain a large market share; therefore, it is vital that the leaders of organisations place emphasis on renewing their drive for growth when aligning their strategies. Customer Service Management capabilities plays a pivotal role in en-

suring high performance within the competitive market arena. According to Brink and Berndt (2004), delivering customer service is an important strategy of any organisation to ensure survival and growth. This paper discusses that by providing excellent customer service organisations find it easier to differentiate themselves from competitors, improve customer retentions and encourage customer loyalty. It is vital that an organisation provides service as expected by customers because it is a contributing factor in building long term relationships with the customer. It can be cost effective for organisations to serve repeat customers than new ones, thereby linking customer loyalty to profits (Christopher et al. 1991; Rust and Zahorik 1993). Repeat customers can be easier to serve because the rules of relationships have already been defined; and thus, participating members know each other and their respective roles and obligations (Congram 1991). It is these long term relationships that contribute to the organisation's profit or loss. Consequently, organisations need to put procedures in place that are accountable for excellent quality service.

The Research Problem Statement

The objective of the research was to evaluate the degree of focus that Crossley Holdings

places on their customers' perception of the service quality. Witnessing the lack of focus on customer service in the local South African market developed an interest to examine the customer perceptions on the quality of customer service especially among the SMMEs. Crossley Holdings is small scale business that supplies carpets to customers within the Durban area. The challenge in this company was to keep up with customer interests by providing a high standard of service. An ideal scenario where the system under consideration is functioning optimally would be by trying to always understand the customer and go beyond customer expectations. In order for an organisation to retain a customer they need to welcome feedback that customers may have with regards to the current status of the business. A dissatisfied customer may have major negative financial impact on the future of the company.

Research Objectives

The research set out to:

1. Measure service expectations of SMME customers.
2. Measure service perceptions of the SMME customers.
3. Establish the SERVQUAL gap, which causes unsuccessful service delivery (Gap 5).
4. Examine the dimensions, that is, the tangibles, reliability, responsiveness, assurance and empathy that contribute to Gap 5.

Literature Review

Customer Service

According to Armistead and Clark (1992), the search for service excellence for those concerned with providing customer service and support for a product is driven by a number of factors. Armistead and Clark (1992) claim that when a customer makes a decision to support an organisation after assessing the differentiation between competing products, they often make their choice on the basis of service and support rather than on product performance. They further state that customer service and support can be profitable if quality of delivery is consistent and risk free for the customers and that costs can be controlled.

With regard to customer service, Mason (2003: 15) defines it as a means of having the knowledge and ability to explain important points to both potential and existing customers. Lucas, cited in Charafaray (2006: 6), states that the definition of customer service depends on an organization-focus and customer-focused organizations that has some common characteristics, namely

- The organisation has both internal and external customers
- The focus is on meeting the needs of the customer.
- Customers find information, products and services easily accessible.
- Policies are in place to allow employees to better serve customers.
- Management and systems support employees' efforts to serve customers.

Continual re-evaluation of the way the business is conducted results in ongoing changes and upgrades to deliver quality service to customer. According to Leung (2014), for some people, great customer service is as straightforward as working out problems and giving answers in an expedient manner; while for others, it means overall pleasantness and politeness from those who represent the frontlines of the corporation. Leung (2014) concludes that "there isn't a right or a wrong, because the factors of what makes customer service "good" also depend heavily upon what specific things a particular customer may hold valuable or their expectations from what industry competitors do. Good customer service is partly defined by the industry, but a large part of how your company defines it will determine what good customer service means to you".

The Role of Customer Service

According to Kotler (2003: 75), more companies are recognizing the importance of satisfying and retaining customers. Further, the scholar states that satisfied customers constitute the company's relationship capital (Kotler 2003). If the company were to be sold, the acquiring company would have to pay not only for the plant, equipment and brand name, but also for the delivered customer base, namely the number and value that would do business with a new firm. Therefore the role of customer service is imperative as its main function of providing a service to the customer has a direct impact on the profitability of the business.

Kotler (2003) mentions the following facts based on customer retention:

- Acquiring new customers can cost five times more than the cost involved in satisfying and retaining current customers. It requires a great deal of effort to induce satisfied customers to switch away from current suppliers.
- The average company loses 10 percent of its customers each year.
- A 5 percent reduction in the customer defection rate can increase profits by 25 percent to 85 percent, depending on the industry.

The general observation is that the customer profit rate tends to increase over the life of the retained customer.

The Nature of Service

The concept of a service has been described by Lovelock and Wright (2002: 6) as an act or performance offered by one party to another. An example of this would be when Crossley Holdings sends a sales representative out to the customer and the sales reps establishes how the company can satisfy the customer's need and thereby following the process and procedure of finally dispatching carpets to a satisfied customer. Services are economic activities that build value and provide benefits for customers at specific times and places, as a result of bringing about a desired change in or on behalf of the receiver of the service (Lovelock and Wright 2002: 6).

The Customer's Role in Service Experiences

Bitner et al. (1997) state that service experiences are the outcomes of interactions between organisations, related system/processes, service employees and customers. The success of many service encounters depends on how effectively the service firm manages its clientele. According to Hoffman and Bateson (2001), the service encounter can be viewed as a three-way fight for control, between the customer, the employee, and the organisation itself. The authors conclude that procedures and systems established by the organisation to balance this arrangement are not created to simply add to the bureaucracy of the encounter, but are primarily put in place for economic reason to ensure profitability. Profit potential can be measured by the Net Present

Value of the Customer (Evans and Lindsay 2005: 162). NPVC is the total profit (revenues associated with the customer minus expenses needed to serve a customer) discounted over time. Lovelock and Young (1979) mention that the service firms should be encouraged to involve customers more in production in order to increase productivity. Increasing consumer participation in the service delivery process has become a popular participation in the service delivery process. Mills and Morris (1989: 728) state "because customers participation, they are indispensable to the production process of service organizations and they can actually control or contribute to their own satisfaction". According to Zeithaml and Bitner (2000: 322) there are three major roles played by customers in service delivery.

Customers as Productive Resources

Zeithaml and Bitner (2001: 322) argue that "service customers have been referred to as 'partial employees' of the organization – human resources who contribute to the organization's productive capacity". The authors also mention that customer input can affect the organization's productivity through both the quality of what they contribute and the quantity of output generated (Zeithaml and Bitner 2003: 322). An example of this is if customers of a carpet manufacturing company or any other small scale service related business provide accurate information early enough with regard to the brief of conceptual design work, designers will be more efficient and accurate in their creations.

Customers as Contributors to Service Quality, Value, and Satisfaction

According to Zeithaml and Bitner (2000: 324) customers may care little that they have increased the productivity of the organization through their participation, but they likely care a great deal about whether their needs are fulfilled. Effective customer participation can increase the likelihood that the needs are met and that the benefits the customer seeks are actually attained (Zeithaml and Bitner 2003: 324).

Customers as Competitors

Bitner et al. (1996) state that the role played by a service customer is that of a potential com-

petitor, as customers have the choice of purchasing services in the market place or producing the service themselves, either fully or in part. For example, a car owner who needs maintenance on his car can choose to do all of his own maintenance (if he has the necessary skills), or have someone else to do all the maintenance tasks (Bitner et al. 1996).

Relationship Marketing

Birling, cited in Giandev (2007: 14), states that relationship marketing is about having an indirect conversation with the customer through analyzing their behaviour over time. The author further states that the relationship marketing process is usually defined as a series of stages, and there are many different names given to these stages, depending on the marketing perspective and the type of business (Giandev 2007: 14). Thus “using the relationship marketing approach, you customize programmes for individual consumer groups and the stage of the process they are going through, as opposed to some forms of database marketing where everybody would get virtually the same promotions, with perhaps a change in offer” (Giandev 2007: 14).

Greenberg (2001: 5) defines CRM as servicing a customer’s need, product interest, or fulfilling their expectation. The author further explains that the customer’s good experience may increase their loyalty and their need to purchase yet again a poor experience may transfer their business to the organization’s competitor. The ability to recognise this process and to actively manage it forms the basis for Customer Relationship Management (2001: 6).

Gentle (2002: 7) point out that customer relationship management is the ultimate competitive edge, which will allow an organisation to identify, capture and retain its most profitable customers, cross-sell and up-sell to them through multiple channels and provide true satisfaction and loyalty in the process. Evans and Lindsay (2005: 169) state that the excellent customer relationship management depends on five aspects.

Accessibility and Commitments

The authors mention that organisations who firmly believe in the quality of their product make strong commitments to their customers. Effec-

tive commitments address the principal concerns of customers, are free from conditions that might weaken customers’ trust and confidence, and are communicated clearly and simply to customers. An example of this would be if a carpet manufacturer who is confident of the quality of carpet that they are currently manufacturing, offers a guarantee that allows customers who are unhappy with the quality of the product to feel free to return the product. This type of guarantee that promises exceptional, uncompromising quality and customer satisfaction assists the organisation in improving itself and possibly recaptures the customer’s good will.

Selecting and Developing Customer Contact Employees

According to Evans and Lindsay (2005: 170), “many organisations employ individuals who show the ability and desire to develop good customer relationships”. Most companies seek people with excellent interpersonal and communication skills, strong problem solving and analytical skills, assertiveness, stress tolerance, patience, empathy, accuracy and attention to detail for this job function. The authors clearly express that companies who are committed to customer relationship management ensure that customer contact employees understand the products and services well enough to handle problems. Organisations who choose to employ unskilled labor at a low cost generally suffer the consequences of poor performance and in some cases the lack of interest on the employee’s part which has a direct impact on the well-being of the organisation. Effective training not only increases an employee’s knowledge but also improves their self-esteem and increases their loyalty to the organisation.

Relevant Customer Contact Requirements

Evans and Lindsay (2005: 171) state that customer contact requirements are measurable performance levels or expectations that define the quality of customer contact with the representative of an organization. Examples of customers’ expectations may include response time (answering the telephone within two rings), or behavioral requirements (using the customer’s name whenever possible).

Effective Complaint Management

Complaints provide a source of product and process improvement ideas. Leading edge companies encourage employees to bring complaints to the surface and encourage them to offer plausible solutions or recommendation to the current problem. Suggestions are recognized and rewarded (Evans and Lindsay 2005: 172).

Strategic Partnership and Alliances

Evans and Lindsay (2005: 173) explain that suppliers are constantly being asked to take on greater responsibilities to help their customers. As companies focus more on their core competencies they are looking outside their organisation for assistance with non-critical support processes. Authors further state that long term customer supplier partnerships characterized by teamwork and mutual confidence represent an important strategic alliance in achieving excellence and business success (Evans and Lindsay 2005: 173).

Liljander and Strandvik, cited in Charafaray (2006: 19), state that long lasting relationships with customers are beneficial for organisations, and the use of relationship marketing can assist organizations to achieve customer retention. In order to build this loyalty basis of customers, organizations should not only concentrate on relationship marketing but also consider creating a service environment, which enhances customer service delivery.

Causes of Service Problems

Yasin and Yavas, cited in Charafaray (2006: 30), state that “today’s sophisticated and discerning customers demand the highest levels of service efficiency, quality, flexibility and dependability”. They also mention that many service organizations recognise that attaining customer satisfaction through the delivery of a quality service is the key to their survival and that having a loyal base of satisfied customers increases sales, reduces costs, improves bottom lines and builds market shares. Zeithaml and Bitner (2000: 20) have identified four factors which contribute to communication problems that have an impact on service delivery and external communications.

Inadequate Management of Services Promises

Zeithaml and Bitner (2000: 405) state that “a discrepancy between service delivery and promises occur when companies fail to manage service promises”. They argue that one of the primary reasons for this discrepancy is that the company lacks the information and integration needed to make fulfilling promises. An example of this would be when a sales representative of a carpet manufacturer sells the service of manufacturing carpet according to the customers’ needs without first checking internally for an exact date as to when the carpet will be ready to dispatch. Over-promising has been found to be a major source of customer dissatisfaction as service providers often finds it easier to make a customer happy by telling them that the service will be delivered within a time frame that the customer wants to hear (Parasuraman et al. 1985: 47). This often results in creating a needlessly bad impression of the service provider when the service is not delivered (Cottle 1990: 170).

Inadequate Management of Customer Expectations

Zeithaml and Bitner (2003: 406) mention that appropriate and accurate communication about service is the responsibility of both the marketing and operations department. Marketing must accurately reflect what happens in actual service encounters and operations must deliver what is promised in communications. An example of this would be if management of a carpet manufacturing company makes an offering such as return on quality analysis, the marketing and sales departments must make the offering appealing enough to be viewed as superior to other competing services. However, the company cannot afford to raise the level of expectation above the level at which the consultant performs as this would lead to disappointed customers (Zeithaml and Bitner 2003: 406).

Inadequate Customer Education

According to Zeithaml and Bitner (2003: 406) educating the customer about how the service will be provided, what their role in delivery involves and how to evaluate the service provided will reduce the possibility of disappointing a customer. Keeping the customer well informed

prepares the customer in advance about the type of service that the customer has contracted to receive, which prevents the customer from receiving surprises which they later realize is not according to their expectations. The authors conclude by stating that if a customer is not informed about peaks and valleys in demand, service overloads and failures are likely to take place.

The Gaps Model

The “Gaps Model” was developed by Berry et al. (1988: 36) based on the traditional definition of quality which is the customers’ perception of service excellence. The authors’ research revealed that customers base service quality judgment on the “gap” that exists between their perceptions of what happened during the service transaction and their expectation of how the service transaction should have occurred (Schneider and White 2004: 41). Authors further state that another way of discussing this gap is the extent to which expectations were disconfirmed, which can either be positively (better than expected service) or negatively (worse than expected service).

Positive behavioral intentions are defined as willingness of customers to do repeat purchase and positive word of mouth advertising (Baumann et al. 2005). Negative behavioral intentions are negative publicity, complaining and customer switching behaviour (Keaveney 1995). However perceptions of excellent service quality do not necessarily translate to loyalty or a bigger share of the market. Satisfied customers do switch their service providers depending on their specific needs irrespective of service quality (Keaveney 1995; Baumann et al. 2005). Gaps in the service offering were identified as critical elements that contribute to customer satisfaction or dissatisfaction with service quality (Berry et al. 1985).

These five gaps indicate a number of internal decisions and activities that influences the discrepancy between expectations and perceptions. Parasuraman et al. (1985) provided a service quality (SERVQUAL) model which gave attention to both the provider and consumer of service quality. The study established that service quality often failed due to a variety of gaps occurring within the providers’ organisation. SERVQUAL attempts to close the four crucial gaps in service delivery by identifying the many

factors contributing to these gaps and presenting ways of reducing these gaps.

The Gap model has five gaps:

1. The gap between management perceptions of consumer’s expectations and expected service.
2. The gap between management perceptions of consumer’s expectations and the translation of perceptions into service quality specification.
3. The gap between translation of perceptions of service quality specification and service delivery.
4. The gap between service delivery and external communications to consumers.
5. The gap between the consumer’s expected level of service and the actual service performance (Chang et al. 2002).

The central focus of the gaps model is the customer gap, the difference between customer expectations and perceptions. Expectations are the reference points customers have coming to a service experience, whilst perceptions reflect the service as actually received. The authors’ further mention that the idea is that firms will want to close this gap between what is expected and what is received to satisfy their customers and build long term relationships with them.

To close the customer gap, the model suggests that four other gaps which, are provider gaps, need to be closed. The provider gaps are the underlying causes behind the customer gap;

Gap 1- Not knowing what customers expect.

Gap 2- Not selecting the right service designs and standards.

Gap 3- Not delivering to service standards.

Gap 4- Not matching performances to promises.

The lack of accurately understanding customer’s expectation results in failure to meet or fulfill customers’ expectations. Companies must be able to anticipate and forecast customers’ needs and expectations and companies can anticipate these needs and expectations by using the service gaps model analysis, which offers an integrated view of the consumer-organisation relationship (Fifield 1992: 136; Proctor 2000: 227; Gabbott and Hogg 1998: 108). Zeithaml and Bitner (1996: 48) emphasize that it is important for companies to understand the gaps that exist in the delivery of their service in order for them to understand what hinders them from providing a superior level of service to their customers. “There are four areas of discrepancies with-

in the organization that inhibit the delivery of a quality service, which need to be addressed” (Zeithaml and Bitner 1996: 38). These areas are;

Gap 1: Consumer Expectation – Management Perception Gap

Gap 1 is the difference between customer expectations of the service and the company’s understanding of those expectations (Zeithaml and Bitner 2000: 482). Authors further mention that there are many reasons for managers not being aware of customers’ expectations. They may not interact directly with the customers, be unwilling to ask about their expectations, or be unprepared to address them. When people with authority and responsibility for setting priorities do not fully understand customers’ expectations, they may trigger a chain of bad decisions and suboptimal resource allocations that result in perceptions of poor service quality. Zeithaml and Bitner (1996: 39) mention that the existence of Gap 1 could be due to factors such as an insufficient and inadequate use of market research, a lack of interaction between management and customers, insufficient upward communication between contact personnel and management, and too many levels between contact personnel and management. As a result, management does not understand how the service should be designed, what support or secondary services the customer requires or what the right quality for the customer is.

Zeithaml and Bitner (1996: 40) explain that in order to close or reduce the size of Gap 1, companies need to establish what is and is not acceptable to the customer in broad terms by conducting sufficient market research. Mullins et al. (2005: 434) state that in proving good service is to collect information through customer surveys, evaluations of customer complaints, finding out what the customer wants or by listening to the customer to determine what service attributes the customer considers important. Zeithaml and Bitner (1996: 40) also mention that management must ensure that all employees understand exactly what the customer wants within organisational constraints and allow employees to work towards the common goal of providing customers with what they want so that a quality service is provided.

Gap 2: Management Perception – Service Quality Specification Gap

Gap 2 is the difference between company understanding customer expectations and development of customer driven services and standards Zeithaml and Bitner (2000: 484). Authors further state that the key factor leading up to this gap are poor service standards, absence of customer defined standards, and inappropriate physical evidence.

According to Zeithaml and Bitner (2000: 484), Gap 2 exists in organisations due to those responsible for setting standards, typically management; sometimes believe that customer expectations are unreasonable or unrealistic. The quality of service delivered by customer contact personnel is critically influenced by the standards against which they are evaluated and compensated (Zeithaml and Bitner 2000: 485). The authors further explain that when service standards are absent or when the standards in place do not reflect customers’ expectations, quality of service as perceived by customers is likely to suffer. Mullins et al. (2005: 435) state that unless firms’ employees know what the company’s service policies are and believe that management is seriously committed to those standards; their performance is likely to fall short of desired levels.

Wahid, cited in Charafaray (2006: 38), states that in order to close Gap 2, management must be committed to service quality. It is further mentioned that this commitment can be shown through “leading by example”, by developing quality policies that set the service standards, providing training to improve employee skills that are necessary for enhancing service quality and by standardizing tasks so that the outcome of the service is uniform and consistent.

Gap 3: Service Quality Specifications – Service Delivery Gap

According to Zeithaml and Bitner (2000: 486) Gap 3 is the discrepancy between development of customer-driven service standards and actual service performance by company employees. The author further states that standards must be backed by appropriate resources (people, systems and technology) and also must be enforced to be effective. Employees must be measured and compensated on the basis of perfor-

mance along those standards. When the level of service delivery performance falls short of the standards, it falls short of what the customer expects as well (Zeithaml and Bitner 2000: 486).

Research has identified many inhibitors in closing Gap 3, which are employees who do not clearly understand the roles they are to play in the company, employees who see conflict between customers and company management, the wrong employees, inadequate technology, inappropriate compensation and recognition and lack of empowerment and teamwork (Zeithaml and Bitner 2000, 1996; Mullins et al. 2005; Parasuraman et al. 1991). According to Mullins et al. (2005: 435) lip service by management is not enough to produce high quality service. The author reports that high standards must be backed by programs, resources and rewards necessary to enable and encourage employees to deliver good service. Employees must be provided with training, equipment, and necessary time to deliver good service (2005: 436). Wahid, cited in Charafaray (2006: 39), argue that matching the right people with the right job and training them in using the technology and the equipment that comes with it can improve employee technology as well as job fit.

Gap 4: Service Delivery – External Communication Gap

Gap 4 illustrates the difference between service delivery and the service providers' external communications. Zeithaml and Bitner (2000: 487). The authors' report that promises made by a service company through its media advertising, sales force, and other communications may potentially raise customer expectations that serve as the standard against which customers assess the service quality. Problems surface when the service organisation over-promises and when the organisation does not listen to the customer (Berry et al. 1985). Key reasons that lead to Gap 4 are lack of integrated service marketing communications, ineffective management of customer expectations, over promising, inadequate horizontal communications (Zeithaml and Bitner 2000: 488).

Mullins (2005: 436) states that even good service performance may disappoint some customers, if the firms marketing communications cause them to have unrealistically high expectations. An example of this would be if a carpet

manufacturer marketing department advertises luxurious carpet that appears to have a thicker pile height than it actually produces is a reason that customers are more than likely to be disappointed, no matter how aesthetically pleasing the overall design may look. Zeithaml and Bitner (2000: 489) state that in addition to service delivery, companies must also manage all communications to customers so that inflated promises do not lead to higher expectations. This gap can be narrowed by keeping promises or not promising what cannot be achieved.

Wahid, cited in Charafaray (2006: 40), indicates that the strategies for reducing Gap 4 include increasing horizontal communication by opening the channels of communication between marketing/sales, human resources, and operations so as to enhance understanding between the relevant departments can do this. The author also explains that direct interaction should be a constant feature between marketing/sales and the actual service providers and that the standard policies and procedures should be used to provide consistent service across branches and departments.

Gap 5: Expected Service – Experience Service

Zeithaml and Bitner (1996: 45) state that Gap 5 is the most important gap as it indicates the difference between expected and perceived quality; that is, the gap between the customers' expectations of service and the service they actually receive. The authors further explain that customer perceptions are subjective assessments of actual service experiences, and customer expectations are the standards of reference points for performance, against which service experiences are compared and are often formulated in terms of what a customer believes should or will happen. An example of this would be when a customer books into a five star hotel, he or she would expect a certain level of service, one that is considerably different from the level that they would expect in a two star hotel.

Gaps 1-4 lead to this gap between customer expectations and their perceptions of the service that is actually received, that is, the quality perceived in a service is a function of all the gaps between expectations and perceived service. This gap can be narrowed by closing Gaps 1-4 (Zeithaml and Bitner 2000). According to

Mullins et al. (2005: 436), Gap 5 results when management fails to close one or more of the other four gaps. He further states that this difference between a customer's expectation and his or her actual experience with the firm leads to dissatisfaction.

METHODOLOGY

Research Instrument Design

Data was collected from the respondents by administering a SERVQUAL model questionnaire. According to Hoffman and Bateson (2001) the SERVQUAL questionnaire is frequently used and a highly debated measure of service. Authors further state that SERVQUAL is a diagnostic tool that uncovers a firms' broad weaknesses and strengths in the area of service delivery. The SERVQUAL instrument was based on five service quality dimensions, including tangibility, reliability, responsiveness, assurance and empathy. Zeithaml and Bitner (2003: 89) mention that the dimensions are as follows;

Reliability – the ability to perform the promised service reliably and accurately;

Responsiveness – the willingness to help the customer and provide prompt service;

Assurance – the knowledge and courtesy of employees and their ability to convey trust and confidence;

Empathy – the provision of caring, individualised attention to customer;

Tangibles – the appearance of the physical facilities, equipment, personnel and communication materials.

The SERVQUAL questionnaire was used because it is widely accepted as a standard for assessing different dimensions, and it has shown to be valid for a number of different situations (Parasuraman et al. 1988: 25). The reason for the use of the SERVQUAL instrument lies with fact that quantitative data was used, and as such the SERVQUAL technique can be proven empirically and the results can be projected to the wider population (Zeithaml and Bitner 2003: 89). Therefore, a standardized SERVQUAL questionnaire was designed to retrieve the necessary data from the respondents.

In this study, an attempt has been made to assess Gap 5 (which is the difference between expected and perceived service quality) as well as to measure the expectations and perceptions

of the customers of Crossley Holdings in terms of service quality. The paper goes further to discuss the SERVQUAL dimensions that contribute the most to Gap 5 (Gap 5 is the function of the other four gaps, that is, one or more of Gaps 1,2,3,4 (Zeithaml et al. 1990: 130).

The Research Sample

A sample size table found in Saunders et al. (2003: 156) was used which examines population sizes and recommended the appropriate sample size. The table reflected that for a population of 120, an approximate sample size of 89 respondents was adequate for the purpose of representatively. Non-probability sampling was exercised on the basis of convenience, availability of respondents, and the judgment of the researchers.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The research was based on measuring the service quality using the SERVQUAL instrument as stated previously. A score was calculated using each of the five SERVQUAL dimensions namely, reliability, responsiveness, assurance, empathy and tangibility. Scores attained from the study assisted in identifying the dimension that most contributed to the delivery of poor service.

Measure Customer Expectation of Service Quality of Crossley Holdings

In measuring the customer expectations of Crossley Holdings service quality, the following was found:

Expectations in Relation to Reliability

Brink and Berendt (2004: 60) define reliability as the organisation being able to provide the customer with accurate service the first time round. Authors further state that prompt responses to customers as well as informing the customer precisely when the service will be rendered assists in enhancing the perceived service quality of the customer. In the reliability dimension, respondents indicated that it is important for a carpet manufacturer to show interest in solving problems. This statement had the highest average score of 6.81. All (100%) of 89

respondents felt that it was important that staff at Crossley Holdings show interest in solving customer problems. Customer expectations in this regard were exceptionally high. Cottle (1992) suggests that companies should train their staff to show a sincere interest in solving customer problems.

The lowest expectation score that was measured for this dimension was for the statement that an excellent carpet manufacturer will insist on error free records. This statement achieved an average score of 6.55. Although this statement had the lowest average score in this dimension, it was still a relatively high score and further stressed the importance for organisations to keep accurate records. The overall average score for reliability dimension was found to be 6.72. This high value suggests that customers have high expectations with regards to reliability and companies need to be aware of customer expectations in this regard or they will fail their customers in providing quality service.

Expectations in Relation to Responsiveness

Irons (1993: 160) advocates that in order to achieve a level of responsiveness means that organisations must have cohesive, harmonious cultures with strong value systems, who need to be led by leaders who understand more than their immediate objectives and can give support by going beyond the ordinary, who can share the problems that arise and who have access to those who plan.

In the reliability dimension, the authors of this paper found that customers considered it to be vital for employees of an excellent carpet manufacturer to always be willing to help customers. All the respondents agreed with this statement. Companies should train and motivate staff to go the extra mile as they are the people that customers interact with (Cottle 1992).

The lowest score in this dimension was for the statement that employees of excellent carpet manufacturer would tell customers exactly when services would be performed. Although customers did not rate this statement as the most important, it still achieved a relatively high score of 6.74 and suggests that customers do have high expectations in this regard.

The overall average for expectations in the responsiveness dimension was found to be (6.83). This was the second highest score of the

five SERVQUAL dimensions and indicates that customers had high expectations with regards to responsiveness and suggests that the quality of staff plays a significant role in the delivery of quality service. Happier people who are more positive about themselves and their world are more satisfied workers and yield more satisfied customers (Schinder and Bowen 1995: 57).

Expectations in Relation to Assurance

Brink and Berendt (2004: 60) state that employees' behaviour must instill confidence in the mind of the customer regarding the organisation, which will then remove some of the fears that the customers may have. The authors further state that employees must be courteous and have enough product service knowledge to respond to customer queries.

In the assurance dimension respondents indicated that they believed that the behaviour of employees of an excellent carpet manufacturer should instill confidence in the customers as well as employees being consistently courteous. Both these statements had an average score of 6.89.

All (100%), of the respondents agreed with both statements which implies that the customers have high expectations with regards to employees instilling confidence and being courteous. The manner in which service providers conduct themselves is a crucial bearing on repeat business, thus selection, training and rewarding of staff is essential in the achievements of service quality (Jobber 1995: 665).

The lowest average score that was recorded for the assurance dimension was for the statement that customers expect employees of an excellent carpet manufacturer to have the knowledge to answer customer questions. Employees need to be qualified for their respective positions, so that they are able to satisfactorily respond to customer queries (Cottle 1992). The overall average score for assurance dimension was found to be 6.84. This was the highest score of the five SERVQUAL dimensions which suggests that customers have exceptionally high expectations with regards to assurance.

Expectations in Relation to Empathy

Hoffmann and Bateson (2001: 337), define empathy as the ability to experience another's

feeling as one's own. An example of this would be if employees of Crossley Holdings could become in touch with what it is like to be a customer of their own firm. The author further states in contrast that firms who do not provide their customers with individual attention when requested and that offer operating hours convenient to the firm and not to the customer fail to demonstrate empathetic behaviour.

In the empathy dimension, respondents indicated that they expected an excellent carpet manufacturer to have employees who give customers personal attention. This statement attained the highest average score of 6.88 and indicates that customers want companies to understand their needs and they desire full attention when communicating with an employee of this organisation.

The lowest average was 6.75 attained for the statement that employees of excellent carpet manufacturer should understand the specific needs of their customers. Though this value 6.75 represented the lowest average score, it still was relatively high enough indicating that the respondents did have high expectations with regards to this aspect of the empathy dimension.

The overall average score for assurance dimension was found to 6.81. This was the second highest score of the five SERVQUAL dimensions which suggests that customers have high expectations with regards to assurance.

Expectations in Relation to Tangibility

This refers to the facilities, equipment and material used which must reflect positively on the organisation, which includes the appearance of the employees (Brink and Berendt 2004: 60). In the tangibility dimension, respondents indicated that it is important for an excellent carpet manufacturer to provide materials associated with the service, such as brochures, and these should be visually appealing. This statement had the highest average score of 6.74 which implied that customer expectations in this regard were high. Respondents placed the least emphasis on the statement that an excellent carpet manufacturer's physical facilities should be visually appealing. This statement had lowest average score of 6.26 in the tangibility dimension. The average overall score for tangibility dimension is 6.51 which was a relatively high score. This score suggested that customers had high expectations with regards to tangibles.

The customers that were sampled had high expectations of service quality of an excellent carpet manufacturer as the average expectations scores for all the SERVQUAL dimensions were above 6.5. The assurance dimension achieved the highest average score 6.84 in the expectations section which was followed by the responsiveness dimension with a score of 6.83. This indicates that the respondents felt that it was important for the employees of an excellent carpet manufacturer to instill confidence in customers, to be consistently courteous, to have knowledge to answers questions, give their customers prompt service, be willing to help their customers as well as never to be too busy to respond to their customers.

Measure Customer Perceptions of Service Quality of Crossley Holdings

In measuring the customer perceptions of Crossley Holdings service quality, the following was found:

Perceptions in Relation to Reliability of Service Provision

In the reliability dimension, 82 of the 89 respondents indicated that employees of Crossley Holdings provided their service at a time they promised to do so. This statement had the highest average score of 6.08. Ninety-two percent (92%) agreed with this statement. This indicates that Crossley Holdings customers were of the opinion that the company provided their service on time. The lowest recorded average score in the reliability dimension was 5.83 and this was for the statement that Crossley Holdings performs the service correctly the first time. This is of concern as it shows that Crossley Holdings customers feel that their services are not performed correctly the first time. This could result in unnecessary expense for the company. Reliability scores the lowest overall average score 5.94 in comparison to all other service quality dimensions. This indicates that Crossley Holdings needs to improve their service quality in this dimension.

Perceptions in Relation to Responsiveness

The statement that employees of Crossley Holdings are always willing to help had the high-

est 6.4 average score in the responsiveness dimension. This suggests that customers felt that employees of Crossley Holdings were always helpful. Robinson (1999: 39) states that customers love to deal with friendly, helpful and motivated staff as this reassures them and endorses their own good feelings thereby enhancing the service experience. The lowest 5.75 recorded average in this dimension was for the statement that employees of Crossley Holdings inform customers exactly when services would be performed. This indicates that customers felt that Crossley Holdings employees did not keep them informed with regard to carpet dispatch dates, stock availability or manufacturing dates.

The score of 5.75 was relatively high; therefore Crossley Holdings need to implement systems that would help alleviate this problem. The overall average score for perception in the responsiveness dimension was 6.00. This represents the second lowest overall average score over all the dimensions and this suggests an area for improvement for Crossley Holdings.

Perceptions in Relation to Assurance

The statement that Crossley Holdings employees are consistently courteous had the highest average 6.66 score in this dimension. A large percent of 80 percent of the respondents are in agreement that employees of Crossley Holdings are consistently courteous. Since employees often have the biggest impact on service perceptions, it is important that they are consistently courteous with customers so as to enhance the service experience (Solomon and Stuart 1997: 375).

The statement about whether customers feel safe in their transactions rated the lowest in this dimension. This statement had the lowest average score of 5.98 which implies that customers of Crossley Holdings have a sense of insecurity when transacting with Crossley. This implies that there is a lack of trust on the customers' part. Morris et al. (1999) state "trust can be seen as a willingness to rely on an exchange partner in whom one has confidence". This means the general expectation that the word of another can be relied on, therefore it is imperative that Crossley Holdings repairs this situation by implementing strategies to instill confidence in customers when transactions take place. The assurance dimension of service quality had the highest

overall average of the five dimensions. This value was 6.23 and suggests that Crossley Holdings fares comparatively well in this regard.

Perceptions in Relation to Empathy

Providing personal attention has proved to be Crossley Holdings' strong point according to their customers' perception. This statement scored the second highest overall average with a value of 6.35 which indicates that customers feel that the company is offering them special and individual attention. People like to feel that they are getting personal attention and this enhances the quality of service in the customers' mind (Solomon and Stuart 1997: 380). The lowest value of 5.94 was for the statement relating to employees that have the customers' best interest at heart. Blem (1995: 33) suggests that customers judge companies by their staff and if they perceive their staff to be friendly and interested in them then customers assume that the rest of the company is also interested in them. Crossley Holdings needs to address the concern of their customers.

Perceptions in Relation to Tangibility

Customers of Crossley Holdings perceived employees to be neat in appearance. The statement attained the highest score of 6.4 in the tangibility dimension. Seventy one 71 of the 89 respondents are in agreement that employees of Crossley Holdings are neat in appearance. Employees are the mirror of an organisation that makes the first contact with the customer. Therefore the attire of a person ignites the first level of confidence in the consumers' mind. The lowest average value recorded was for the statement that Crossley has modern looking equipment. The score recorded for this statement was 5.7 based on Crossley Holdings has modern looking equipment. This score implies that there is room for improvement with regards to the tangibility dimension. Tangibles are relatively easy to sort out and would enhance customer perception of Crossley Holdings. The overall average for this dimension is 6.06. This figure is ranked in the middle when compared to the other overall averages in the other dimensions which implies that Crossley Holdings fared comparatively well in this regard.

The reliability dimension scored the lowest 5.94 overall average score in the perception section which suggests that customers have a low perception of Crossley Holding's ability to perform a promised service dependably and accurately. Generally the statistics reflected that the customers have a relatively high perception of Crossley Holdings service quality, as the average perception scores for all the SERVQUAL dimensions is 6.07. The highest average overall score in the perception section belonged to the assurance dimension 6.23 followed by the empathy dimension 6.15. This implies that respondents feel that it is important for employees of SMMEs to be knowledgeable, courteous, have the ability to inspire trust and instill confidence in their customers as well as providing individual attention and always having the customers' best interests at heart.

Gap Analysis

Gap Analysis – Reliability

The statement that SMMEs provide the service right the first time obtained a large value of -.90. This was based on the difference of the customers' perceptions of 5.83 and customers expectation 6.73 which was the largest gap score in the reliability dimension. The lowest gap score in the reliability dimension was -.66. This value was calculated based on the statement that Crossley Holdings insists on error free records. Since all the statements in the reliability dimension received negative scores indicates that there is a degree of dissatisfaction with the quality of service that Crossley Holdings delivers.

Gap Analysis – Responsiveness

The highest gap score for the responsiveness dimension was -1.01. This value was based on the statement that employees of Crossley Holdings are never too busy to respond to your requests. This gap score -1.01 was the highest gap score in all five dimensions as well as the highest overall average score of -0.83. These high scores exposed that the responsiveness dimension to be a poor contributor of service delivery. The lowest gap score for the responsiveness dimension was -0.52 and this was for the statement that employees of Crossley Holdings are always willing to help you. All state-

ments received negative gap scores between perceptions and expectations in this dimension which indicates that the customers are dissatisfied with quality of service provided by Crossley Holdings.

Gap Analysis – Assurance

The statement that the behaviour of employees of Crossley Holdings instills confidence in you obtained a large value of -.88 which was based on the difference of the customers' perceptions of (6.01) and customers' expectation 6.89. This is the largest gap score in the assurance dimension. The lowest gap score in the assurance dimension was -.23. This value was calculated based on the statement that employees of Crossley Holdings are consistently courteous to you. Since all the statements in the assurance dimension received negative scores indicates that there is a degree of dissatisfaction with the quality of service that Crossley Holdings provides.

Gap Analysis – Empathy

The highest gap score for the empathy dimension was -.89. This value was based on the statement that Crossley Holdings has your best interest at heart. The lowest gap score for the empathy dimension was -0.53 and this was for the statement that Crossley Holdings has employees who give you personal attention. All statements received negative gap scores between perceptions and expectations in this dimension which indicates that the customers are dissatisfied with quality of service provided by Crossley Holdings.

Gap Analysis – Tangibility

The statement that Crossley Holdings has operating hours convenient to you obtained a value of -.68 which was based on the difference of the customers' perceptions of 5.98 and customers expectation 6.66. This is the largest gap score in the tangibility dimension. The lowest gap score in the tangibility dimension was -.14. This value was calculated based on the statement that employees of Crossley Holdings are neat in appearance. Since all the statements in the tangibility dimension received negative scores indicates that there is a degree of dissat-

isfaction with the quality of service that Crossley Holdings delivers.

Servqual Dimensions and Poor Service Delivery (Gap 5)

Study and comparison of customers' perception and expectation scores with regards to the Crossley Holdings service quality revealed that gaps occurred in all five of the service quality dimensions. These gaps are the contributors that disrupt the delivery of service quality. The Table 1 shows the average scores for customer expectations, customer perceptions as well as gap scores per dimension in ascending order.

Table 1: Average SERVQUAL score

<i>SERVQUAL dimensions</i>	<i>Average expectation</i>	<i>Average perception</i>	<i>Average gap scores</i>
Tangibility	6.51	6.06	- 0.45
Assurance	6.84	6.23	- 0.61
Empathy	6.81	6.15	- 0.66
Reliability	6.72	5.94	- 0.78
Responsiveness	6.83	6.00	- 0.83
Total average	6.74	6.08	-0.66

Tangibility

This dimension received an overall average gap score of -0.45. The tangibility dimension received the lowest recorded gap score of the five dimensions. The highest statement gap score for the tangibility dimension was for the statement that Crossley Holdings has operating hours that are convenient. This implies that Crossley Holdings customers do not feel that the operating hours are convenient therefore suggests an area for improvement.

Assurance

The overall average gap score for assurance dimension was -0.61. This was the second lowest recorded gap score of the five dimensions. The highest statement gap score for the assurance dimension for the service quality was -0.88 for the statement that the behaviour of employees of Crossley Holdings instills confidence in you. This implies that the customers are of the opinion that employees of Crossley Holdings do not have the competency to instill confidence.

Attention should be paid in improving staffs skills with regard to instilling confidence in the customer. The scores for the assurance gap are relatively low in comparison to other dimensions, which imply that Crossley Holdings ought to address this issue as this would not be as difficult as the responsiveness dimension which has a much larger gap.

Empathy

This dimension received an overall average gap score of -0.66. The empathy dimension received the third highest average gap score of the five dimensions. The score implies that customers of Crossley Holdings are not completely satisfied with empathy aspect of Crossley Holdings service quality. SMMEs needs to improve the empathy aspect of the business, although this gap value does not seem very high in comparison to the gap values of the other dimensions. Particular attention needs to be paid to the highest statement gap score -0.89 for the empathy dimension which was for the statement that stated that Crossley Holdings has the customers' best interest at heart.

Reliability

The overall average gap score for reliability dimension was -0.78. This was the second highest recorded gap score of the five dimensions. The highest statement gap score for the reliability dimension for the service quality was -0.90 for the statement that stated that Crossley Holdings provided the service right the first time. This statement is the largest contributor to the gap in the service delivery in quality. The second largest contributor -0.85 is the gap that customers are of the opinion that when Crossley Holdings promises to do something by a certain time they don't seem to adhere to this. This indicates that Crossley Holdings customers have lost faith in their ability to promise and to perform services correctly the first time.

Responsiveness

The overall average gap score for responsiveness dimension was -0.83. This was the highest recorded gap score of the five dimensions. The highest statement gap score for the reliability dimension for the service quality was -1.01 a

biggest contributor to the difference between expectation and perception. The statement responsible for this gap was that employees are never too busy to respond to customers' requests. Another contributor to this gap is the statement that employees must tell customers exactly when service will be performed.

Crossley Holdings needs to address this issue and train their staff to convey a sense of readiness and willingness to assist the customer. Staff also needs to have access to delivery systems which will enable them to inform customers about their requests and whether it can or cannot be accommodated. Generally customers just want to be informed and that they are more than likely to accept service delivery failures as long as they are informed.

CONCLUSION

Service quality offers a means of achieving success among competing organisations that offer similar products. The benefits that SMME such as Crossley Holdings will achieve with regards to attaining a high standard of service quality will include increase in market share, repeat purchases and increased customer satisfaction. Ultimately SMMEs needs to focus on the key aspects of delivering service quality which would consist of a detailed understanding of the customers' needs, to be focused on providing quality, and to provide service delivery systems that are designed to support the organisations overall quality mission. Modification or improvement of systems will award employees of SMMEs an opportunity to improve service offerings in their pursuit to create high quality service standards.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Based on evidence obtained from the research, it is apparent that employees are the main contributing factor that make or break the service delivery in an organisation. Customers' perceptions are based on their interaction with employees, therefore it is critical that Crossley Holdings reviews its current situation with regards to staff, hence the authors of this study propose the following recommendations;

In order to practice a successful service marketing Crossley Holdings needs to exercise internal marketing successfully. It is imperative that

all SMMEs must compete aggressively and imaginatively for new employees so that the right people are serving their customers. Hiring the best qualified people to do the job is a key factor in promoting quality.

Efforts must be made to facilitate employees in their efforts to deliver quality service. In other words employees must receive necessary tools and resources to deliver quality service. They must receive adequate resources and training, have the equipment and supplies required for their work, and have the supportive managerial practices and assistance they need.

It is recommended that the staff in the customer service department conduct after sales surveys on a continuous basis or soon after a transaction takes place between SMMEs and the customer. The after sales surveys address consumer satisfaction while the service encounter is still fresh in the consumer's mind. For instance after sale surveys attempts to contact every customer and takes corrective action if a customer is less than satisfied with his or her purchase decision. Another vital component of the service quality information system is employee research. It is recommended that SMMEs implement an employee survey which serves as an internal measure of service quality concerning employee morale, attitude and perceived obstacles to the provision of quality service. Often employees would like to provide a higher level of quality service but feel that their hands are tied by internal regulations and policies. For instance, it is argued that employee complaints serve as an early warning system as employees often see the system breaking down long before the customers do.

It is recommended that management at Crossley Holdings SMME needs to enforce team work. Team work allows the team to work in cohesion, which enhances the contact employee's ability to effectively serve their customers especially when dealing with a high rated customer. Under these stressful situations the contact employee requires backup from his/her team in order to deal with the difficult situation at hand.

It is recommended that management adopt an upfront and honest attitude with staff members and assure them about growth within the organisation. Management needs to advise employees on the future organizational structure with a time line, and identify key employees with service responsibilities. Increase the train-

ing budget to develop staff to understand the impact of poor service delivery and to stress the importance of time management. It is advised that a reward program is introduced as an incentive for employees to be acknowledged and motivated.

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