

## Consumer Perceptions on Service Quality at EtheKwini Municipality within the Customer Service Centres\*

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**KEYWORDS** Customer Expectation. SERVQUAL Model

**ABSTRACT** The Sizakala Customer Care Centres within eThekweni Municipality of South Africa are to ensure that services are easily accessible to customers. The study aimed to investigate customer perceptions on service quality in the Sizakala Customer Services Centres of eThekweni Municipality. Self-administered questionnaires were used to collect data from community members who visit the Sizakala Customer Service Centres. When comparing the customers' expectations of service quality in the Sizakala Customer Centre to customer perceptions of service quality, it was evident that gaps occurred in all 5 of the service quality dimensions. It was found that Sizakala Customer Centres needed to improve most on their responsiveness dimension which had the highest (-0.73) average gap score, in order to enhance the quality of service that they provided.

### INTRODUCTION

In this the researchers look at an overview of the Sizakala Customer Service Centres and thereafter highlight a discussion on service quality.

#### The Sizakala Customer Services Centres

The Sizakala Customer Care Centres is within Durban's eThekweni Municipality of South Africa and is there to ensure that services are easily accessible to its customers. The purpose of the eThekweni Municipality is to facilitate and ensure the provision of services, infrastructure and support to its entire citizen. This assists in creating an enabling environment for all citizens to access opportunities that will enable them to contribute towards sustainable economy and therefore create a better quality of life for all. Regional Centres which house the Sizakala eThekweni Municipality has a vision that by 2020

the eThekweni Municipality will enjoy the reputation of being Africa's most liveable city, where all citizens live in harmony. It has been indicated that this vision will be achieved by growing its economy and meeting people's needs so that all citizens enjoy a high quality of life with equal opportunities, in a city that they are truly proud of.

In order to achieve its vision of being the most caring and liveable city in Africa, it has an integrated Development Plan (IDP) that is a strategic guide towards achieving the vision. The IDP has an Eight Point Plan, which translates the City's key choices into focused activities. These eight point plans are:

Plan One – Sustaining our natural and built environment

Plan Two – Economic development and job creation

Plan Three – Quality living environments

Plan Four – Safe, healthy and secure environment

Plan Five – Empowering our citizens

Plan Six – Celebrating our cultural diversity

Plan Seven – Good governance

Plan Eight – Financial viability and sustainability

Customer Centres fall under plan 7 of the IDP, which is, Good Governance.

The Sizakala Customer Services Centres are meant to provide a range of municipal services under one roof, to improve service quality of the residents of eThekweni Municipality. These Cus-

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tomers Centres are distributed across the Metro area, with the intention of bringing services closer to the majority of the citizens of eThekweni, which is, ensuring that services are more easily accessible to all residents.

There are three types of centres currently run by the Regional Centres Unit namely:

- Multi-Purpose Community Centres / Thusing Centres
- One Stop Shops
- First Stop Shops / Information Centres

Multipurpose Community Centres / Thusing Centres are centres where other Government services are available as well, such as Home Affairs, Social Welfare Departments etc. One stop shops cater for all civic and municipal needs ranging from providing information to technical assistance such as town planning, engineering, etc. First stop shops on the other hand are not as equipped as the One stop shops, staff at these kind of shops provide general information to customers and assist by logging their complaint for referral to the correct department for attention.

### Services and Service Quality

According to Naidoo (2015:42) as service marketing has evolved over time, more research has been conducted on quality and how it impacts on the customer.

Services can be defined as actions and performances provided or co-produced by one entity or person for another entity or person (Zeithaml 2009:4). Services have also been defined as the performance of work or duty by an official or an act of helping others, or power to control or make use of resources, or an organisation or system providing the public with something useful or necessary (The Universal Dictionary 1961: 1394-1395, as contained in Crous 2006). It can be argued that services cover a wide spectrum of activities, ranging from the highly tangible to the highly intangible, however the common element in service quality is that whatever the service quality, is always based on the customer's perception (Woodruffe 1995:107).

Quality on the other hand is defined as the totality of features and characteristics of a product or service that bear on its ability to satisfy stated or implied needs. This definition can be summarised as consistent conformance to customers' expectation, as opposed to fitness for purpose.

Parasuraman et al. (1985: 47) identified six causes of service quality problems, namely:

- Overlapping production and consumption of service;
- Inadequate service to "intermediate customers";
- Communication shortfalls;
- View of clients statistics;
- Short-run view of business; and
- Service proliferation and complexity.

Research conducted by Parasuraman et al. (1988:12) identified ten criteria that customers use to judge the quality of service that they receive namely:

- **Reliability:** this relates to ability of the service provider to perform the promised service dependably and accurately.
- **Access:** Is the service accessible and delivered with little waiting?
- **Security:** Is the service free from danger, risk or doubt?
- **Credibility:** How trustworthy and honest does the service provider appear to be?
- **Understanding the customer:** How much effort does the organization make to get to know its customers and understand their needs?
- **Responsiveness:** How willing are service employees to help customers, and to deal with their specific problems?
- **Competence:** To what extent does staff possess the required skills and knowledge to perform the services?
- **Courtesy:** Are staff polite and considerate to consumers?
- **Tangibles:** What assessments can be made of the appearance of the physical facilities, equipment and personnel and communication materials?
- **Communication:** How good is the organization at communicating effectively what is provided in the service and what role customers are expected to play? Specifically, perhaps are customers kept informed about reasons for possible breakdowns in the delivery system? (Parasuraman et al. 1985: 41- 50)

After further research Parasuraman et al. (1985) collapsed the above ten dimensions of service quality into five namely:

- **Tangibles:** including the physical components of the service, for example, seating, lighting, etc.

- **Reliability:** dependability of service provider and accuracy of performance.
- **Responsiveness:** promptness and helpfulness.
- **Assurance:** knowledge and courtesy of employees and their ability to inspire trust and confidence.
- **Empathy:** caring, individualised attention the firm gives its customers.

The specific service characteristics (for example, friendliness, empathy, convenience) are grouped into so-called service quality dimensions in order to make them operational. There are various approaches to service quality dimensions. The most important one is based the SERVQUAL approach differentiating five dimensions: tangibles, reliability, responsiveness, assurance, empathy). Naidoo (2014: 209) also adds to the quality debate by saying that the marketing department within any organization should at all times keep abreast of the customer's perceptions of service quality. This is especially important as poor service quality places a firm at a competitive disadvantage and results in driving away dissatisfied customers that once formed part of the firm's market segment and contributed to its overall market share within that industry. The idea, therefore, is to develop marketing programmes around the concept of quality within a firm's service offerings.

Alvarado-Herrera et al. (2015) developed and validated a measurement scale for consumer's perceptions of corporate social responsibility (CSRConsPerScale) using the three-dimensional social, environmental and economic conceptual approach as a theoretical basis. The content of the proposed scale items assumed that the consumer must have a certain degree of knowledge of the firm's CSR initiatives to prevent erratic, unthinking responses or reactions that are marked by social desirability. Unfortunately there is usually low awareness of a company's CSR activities among its external stakeholders, especially the consumers.

Mishra et al. (2015) developed a multi-dimensional framework providing for an exhaustive operationalization of a product's design by its user. Khan et al. (2015) developed a conceptual and empirical framework with a sample of approximately 800 participants, and showed how the constructs and the scales capture perceptions of payment modes (PPM). The PPM measurement scale demonstrates acceptable reliability

and shows that consumer perceptions of payment modes influence spending behavior and predict ownership of financial cards in possession.

Sumaedi and Yarmen (2015) proposed a service quality model that is specifically designed for measuring perceived service quality of fast food restaurant in an Islamic Country. The obvious weakness of the model is that it cannot be generalized to all countries and all types of industries. It is restricted to Islamic countries and fast food restaurants only.

Parguel et al. (2016) investigated the impact of price display in the luxury sector. Price display has always been thought of as "bad practice" in luxury marketing but had never been explored empirically. Even though the study provided a number of noteworthy theoretical insights and interesting managerial implications the results do not apply to all types and classes of customers.

## RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

In this section the researchers present the key questions, research design, sampling design and size, data collection and instrument, data analysis, reliability and limitations to the study.

### Key Research Questions

In order to investigate customer perceptions on service quality in the Sizakala Customer Service centres within eThekweni Municipality, this study will attempt to answer the following key questions:

- How do customers perceive the service quality at the "one stop" Sizakala Customer Care centres?
- What are current levels of service quality in the Sizakala Customers Services Centre of eThekweni Municipality?
- What are current levels of customer satisfaction with regards to services they receive in the Sizakala Customer Care centres?
- Where are gaps in the process of service delivery in meeting the customer expectations?
- Which areas can the management target to improve in terms of customer service, in the Sizakala Customer Care Centres?

## Research Design

Research design constitutes the blue print for collection, measurement, and analysis of data (Cooper and Schindler 2003:134). For this study the blue print is outlined, using the quantitative research method. The researchers use a survey which is a data collection method, utilising questionnaires to get responses from respondents.

## Sampling Design and Sample Size

The sampling procedure that was used for this study is probability sampling. Probability sample is a sample that has been selected using random selection so that each unit in the population has a known chance of being selected (Bryman and Bell 2007:182). The researchers further state that the main aim of probability sampling is to keep sampling error to a minimum.

Saunders et al. (2003:153) indicate that the process of probability sampling can be divided into four stages, namely:

- Firstly, identification of a suitable sampling frame based on research questions or objectives;
- Secondly, making decision on a suitable sample size;
- Thirdly, selecting the most appropriate sampling technique and the sample; and
- Finally, checking that the sample is representative of the population.

After considering the four stage of probability sampling, a sample for this study was determined and it comprised of customers visiting four Sizakala Customer Centres, namely, Pinetown, Kingsburgh, Clermont and Umlazi Mega-City. These four Customer Service Centres fall under eThekweni Municipality and are normally visited by diverse groups of ratepayers to access various services. The number of respondents sampled was 77, representing a population of eThekweni Customers. These customers were issued questionnaires that were administered on site, and were guided on how to answer the questions.

## Data Collection and Questionnaire Design

The 77 respondents were administered a questionnaire adapted to the SERVQUAL instrument. The questionnaire covered the five dimensions of quality as proposed by Parasuraman et al. (1988) and Ziethaml and Bitner (2003:89).

## Data Analysis

The collected data was statistically analysed using SPSS. The empirical data was from the responses from community members who visited the Sizakala Customer Service centres and people who are responsible for the functioning of these centres.

## RESULTS

This section presents the study results. The SERVQUAL questionnaire was used and it was administered to 77 respondents.

## Reliability of the Instrument

In this study the Cronbach's coefficient was used to test the reliability of the research instruments.

**Table 1: Reliability Statistics, Cronbach's Alpha**

| <i>Cronbach's Alpha</i> | <i>No. of items</i> |
|-------------------------|---------------------|
| 0.914                   | 27                  |

The alpha coefficient for the 27 items was found to be 0.914, and this shows a very high internal consistency therefore we can argue that the questionnaire used for the study was extremely reliable (Table 1).

## Sample Profile

A population of 200 customers was targeted for the study and 50 percent of them were from Pinetown Sizakala Centre and Mega City Sizakala Centre. The reason being that the geographic location of these two is where most locations are based. From the 77 targeted respondents a total of 76 responses were received.

## Gender

The majority of respondents were females making 56.6 percent as given in Table 2.

**Table 2: Gender**

|        | <i>Frequency</i> | <i>Percent</i> |
|--------|------------------|----------------|
| Male   | 33               | 43.4           |
| Female | 43               | 56.6           |
| Total  | 76               | 100.0          |

### Age Range (in years)

The majority of respondents which is 52.6% were between the ages of 35-44 years and data is given in Table 3.

**Table 3: Age range**

| Age range  | Number of respondents | Percent |
|------------|-----------------------|---------|
| Under 25   | 2                     | 2.6     |
| 25-34      | 10                    | 13.2    |
| 35-44      | 40                    | 52.6    |
| 45-54      | 18                    | 23.7    |
| 55-64      | 5                     | 6.6     |
| 65 or over | 1                     | 1.3     |
| Total      | 76                    | 100.0   |

### Level of Education

Table 4 illustrates the level of education for the respondents, with 36 of them possessing tertiary qualifications and 32 having post graduate qualifications.

### Frequency of Centre Visits

Table 5 illustrates the relationship between the number of times the respondents visited Sizakala Customer Centres which is also expressed as percentages of respondents that visited the centres.

**Table 5: Frequency of centre visits**

| Response           | Number of respondents | Percent |
|--------------------|-----------------------|---------|
| Less than 5 times  | 50                    | 65.8    |
| 6-9 times          | 7                     | 9.2     |
| 10-20 times        | 15                    | 19.7    |
| More than 20 times | 3                     | 3.9     |
| 5.00               | 1                     | 1.3     |
| Total              | 76                    | 100.0   |

A large percentage of the sample (66%) indicated that they visited the centres less than 5 times. This implies that the majority of the respondents don't frequently visit the Sizakala Customer Centres. The SERVQUAL statements given in Table 6 were used in the study. The five dimensions of quality used were service reliability, service responsiveness, service assurance, empathy and tangibility.

### Gap Analysis

According to Ziethaml and Bitner (1996: 45), Gap 5 is the difference between expected and perceived service quality. In other words it is the customers' expectations of the service and the service they actually receive. An average mean score was calculated based on the five-point rating scale for each response to each statement in both the expectations and perceptions sections. The difference between the mean was calculated using the formula given in (1).

**Table 6: SERVQUAL statements**

| SERVQUAL Statements                                    |
|--------------------------------------------------------|
| <i>Reliability</i>                                     |
| 3. Keep to promised response time                      |
| 5. Perform service right the first time                |
| <i>Responsiveness</i>                                  |
| 7. Insist on error free service                        |
| 9. Give prompt service                                 |
| <i>Assurance</i>                                       |
| 8. Staff behaviour instils confidence                  |
| 10. Staff are knowledgeable                            |
| <i>Empathy</i>                                         |
| 4. Staff shows sincere interest in resolving a problem |
| 6. Keeping service levels at the same standard         |
| <i>Tangibility</i>                                     |
| 1. Physical facilities are visually appealing          |
| 2. Materials are visually appealing                    |

$$\text{SERVQUAL score} = \text{Perceptions} - \text{Expectations} \quad (1)$$

If the SERVQUAL score is a negative value then it means that customers' expectations are not met and therefore are not satisfied. Table 7 shows the means of expectations of customers visiting the Sizakala Customer Centre, the means of customer perceptions of service experience and the means of the SERVQUAL scores (the difference between perception and expectation). For perceptions all means are above 3, which is the middle score and this indicates that customers have high perceptions of the service they received at Sizakala Customer Centres.

The means for expectations were all above 4, and this indicated that customers have high expectations of the service from the Sizakala Customer Centres. Statement 10, on the Service Assurance had the highest mean, indicating that customers expected that staff at the centres be knowledgeable. The SERVQUAL score means are negative showing that customer expectations have not been met. Statement 7 (insisting on error free service) was the most negative (-0.8) showing that customers expected Sizakala Cus-

**Table 7: Gap analysis**

| <i>SERVQUAL Statements</i>                             | <i>Perception mean</i> | <i>Expectation mean</i> | <i>Mean difference</i> |
|--------------------------------------------------------|------------------------|-------------------------|------------------------|
| <i>Reliability</i>                                     |                        |                         |                        |
| 3. Keep to promised response time                      | 3.51                   | 4.26                    | -0.75                  |
| 5. Perform service right the first time                | 3.65                   | 4.15                    | -0.5                   |
| <i>Responsiveness</i>                                  |                        |                         |                        |
| 7. Insist on error free service                        | 3.35                   | 4.15                    | -0.8                   |
| 9. Give prompt service                                 | 3.61                   | 4.26                    | -0.65                  |
| <i>Assurance</i>                                       |                        |                         |                        |
| 8. Staff behaviour instils confidence                  | 3.78                   | 4.34                    | -0.56                  |
| 10. Staff are knowledgeable                            | 3.94                   | 4.42                    | -0.48                  |
| <i>Empathy</i>                                         |                        |                         |                        |
| 4. Staff shows sincere interest in resolving a problem | 3.72                   | 4.23                    | -0.51                  |
| 6. Keeping service levels at the same standard         | 3.44                   | 4.05                    | -0.61                  |
| <i>Tangibility</i>                                     |                        |                         |                        |
| 1. Physical facilities are visually appealing          | 3.85                   | 4.21                    | -0.36                  |
| 2. Materials are visually appealing                    | 3.72                   | 4.17                    | -0.45                  |

tomers Centres to provide error free service, but this expectation was not met. The lowest statement gap score of -0.36 was for statement 1 (physically facilities are visually appealing) and this indicated that customers perceived Sizakala Customer Centres as visually appealing.

One can therefore argue that it is evident that customers had high expectations of service for all the dimension, but after they received the service the perceptions they had were also high (that is, above 3), but were not as high as the expectations and thus resulting in negative SERVQUAL score.

### The SERVQUAL Index

The service quality index establishes the overall average of the gap scores for the five dimensions and was found to be -0.57. Table 8 depicts the average perceptions and average expectations score as well the difference between these scores.

**Table 8: Average SERVQUAL scores**

| <i>SERVQUAL dimensions</i> | <i>Average perceptions</i> | <i>Average expectations</i> | <i>Average gap scores</i> |
|----------------------------|----------------------------|-----------------------------|---------------------------|
| Reliability                | 3.58                       | 4.21                        | -0.63                     |
| Responsiveness             | 3.48                       | 4.21                        | -0.73                     |
| Assurance                  | 3.86                       | 4.38                        | -0.52                     |
| Empathy                    | 3.58                       | 4.14                        | -0.56                     |
| Tangibility                | 3.78                       | 4.19                        | -0.41                     |
|                            | 3.66                       | 4.23                        | -0.57                     |

The responsiveness dimension showed the greatest difference of (-0.73) between the perceptions and expectations. This was followed by -

0.63 in the reliability dimension, empathy at -0.56, assurance at -0.52 and finally tangibility at -0.41.

The negative difference in values between the perceptions and expectations implies that customer expectations have exceeded customer perceptions. This indicated that there was a gap in service in all the SERVQUAL dimensions.

### Chi-square Tests

Chi square tests were done for the following hypotheses.

#### Hypotheses Set 1

$H_0$ : Visually appealing facilities and visually appealing material are independent of each other.

$H_1$ : Visually appealing facilities and visually appealing material are not independent of each other.

The number 0.000 given in Table 9 is not zero but actually means that the significance is less than 0.0005 (Saunders et al. 2003:359).

**Table 9: Chi-square test results for visually appealing facilities and visually appealing material statements**

|                    | <i>Value</i> | <i>df</i> | <i>Asymp. Sig. (2-sided)</i> |
|--------------------|--------------|-----------|------------------------------|
| Pearson Chi-square | 41.174       | 12        | 0.000                        |

Chi-square test result: ( $\chi^2 = 41.174$ ;  $\alpha = 0.05$ ;  $p < 0.0005$ ). Reject  $H_0$  and accept  $H_1$ .



### Hypotheses Set 2

$H_0$ : Sizakala Customer Centre keeps to its promised response time and Sizaka

Customer Centre keeps its service levels at the same standard all the time are independent of each other.

$H_1$ : Sizakala Customer Centre keeps to its promised response time and Sizaka

Customer Centre keeps its service levels at the same standard all the time are dependent of each other (Table 10).

**Table 10: Chi-square test results for Sizakala Customer Centre keeping same service standards all the time and Sizakala Customer Centre keeping to its promised time**

|                    | Value  | df | Asymp. Sig. (2-sided) |
|--------------------|--------|----|-----------------------|
| Pearson Chi-square | 85.697 | 16 | 0.000                 |

Chi-square test result: ( $\chi^2= 85.697$ ;  $\hat{\alpha} = 0.05$ ;  $p < 0.0005$ ). Reject  $H_0$  and accept  $H_1$ .

### Hypotheses Set 3

$H_0$ : Facilities in the Sizakala Customer Centre will be appealing and materials in Sizaka Customer Centre will be visually appealing are independent of each other.

$H_1$ : Facilities in the Sizakala Customer Centre will be visually appealing and materials in the Sizaka Customer Centre will be visually appealing are dependent of each other.

The results of the test are given in Table 11.

**Table 11: Chi-square test results for facilities in the Sizakala Customer Centre being visually appealing and materials associated with the service being visually appealing**

|                    | Value   | df | Asymp. Sig. (2-sided) |
|--------------------|---------|----|-----------------------|
| Pearson Chi-square | 128.365 | 12 | 0.000                 |

Chi-square test result: ( $\chi^2= 128.365$ ;  $\hat{\alpha} = 0.05$ ;  $p < 0.0005$ ). Reject  $H_0$  and accept  $H_1$ .

### Hypotheses Set 4

$H_0$ : Sizakala Customer Centre will keep to its promised response time and Sizakala Customer Centre will insist on error free service are independent of each other.

$H_1$ : Sizakala Customer Centre will keep to its promised response time and Sizakala Customer Centre will insist on error free service are dependent of each other.

The results of the test are given in Table 12.

**Table 12: Chi-square test results for Sizakala Customer Centre keeping to its promised time and Sizakala Customer Centre performing service right the first time**

|                    | Value   | df | Asymp. Sig. (2-sided) |
|--------------------|---------|----|-----------------------|
| Pearson Chi-square | 131.275 | 16 | 0.000                 |

Chi-square test result: ( $\chi^2= 131.275$ ;  $\hat{\alpha} = 0.05$ ;  $p < 0.0005$ ). Reject  $H_0$  and accept  $H_1$ .

### Hypotheses Set 5

$H_0$ : Sizakala Customer Centre will perform service right the first time and Sizakala Customer Centre will keep its service levels at the same standard all the time are independent of each other.

$H_1$ : Sizakala Customer Centre will perform service right the first time and Sizakala Customer Centre will keep its service levels at the same standard all the time are dependent of each other.

The results of the test are given in Table 13.

**Table 13: Chi-square test results for Sizakala Customer Centre performing service right the first time and Sizakala Customer Centre keeping same service standards all the time**

|                    | Value   | df | Asymp. Sig. (2-sided) |
|--------------------|---------|----|-----------------------|
| Pearson Chi-square | 118.298 | 16 | 0.000                 |

Chi-square test result: ( $\chi^2= 118.298$ ;  $\hat{\alpha} = 0.05$ ;  $p < 0.0005$ ). Reject  $H_0$  and accept  $H_1$ .

### Hypotheses Set 6

$H_0$ : Sizakala Customer Centre will keep its service levels at the same standard all the time and Sizakala Customer Centre will insist on error free service are independent of each other.

$H_1$ : Sizakala Customer Centre will keep its service levels at the same standard all the time and Sizakala Customer Centre will insist on error free service are dependent of each other.

The results of the test are given in Table 14.

**Table 14: Chi-square test results for Sizakala Customer Centre keeping same service standards all the time and Sizakala Customer Centre insisting on error free service**

|                    | Value   | df | Asymp. Sig. (2-sided) |
|--------------------|---------|----|-----------------------|
| Pearson Chi-square | 104.275 | 16 | 0.000                 |

Chi-square test result: ( $\chi^2=104.275$ ;  $\hat{\alpha}=0.05$ ;  $p < 0.0005$ ). Reject  $H_0$  and accept  $H_1$ .

### Hypotheses Set 7

$H_0$ : Sizakala Customer Centre will insist on error free service and staff at Sizakala Customer Centre will be knowledgeable are independent of each other.

$H_1$ : Sizakala Customer Centre Sizakala Customer Centre will insist on error free service and staff at Sizakala Customer Centre will be knowledgeable are dependent of are dependent of each.

The results of the test are given in Table 15.

**Table 15: Chi-square test results Sizakala Customer Centre insisting on error free service and staff at Sizakala Customer Centre being knowledgeable**

|                    | Value  | df | Asymp. Sig. (2-sided) |
|--------------------|--------|----|-----------------------|
| Pearson Chi-square | 64.413 | 8  | 0.000                 |

Chi-square test result: ( $\chi^2=64.413$ ;  $\hat{\alpha}=0.05$ ;  $p < 0.0005$ ). Reject  $H_0$  and accept  $H_1$ .

### Hypotheses Set 8

$H_0$ : The staff at Sizakala Customer Centre will be knowledgeable and the staff at Sizakala Customer Centre will give you prompt service are independent of each other.

$H_1$ : The staff at Sizakala Customer Centre will be knowledgeable and the staff at Sizakala Customer Centre will give you prompt service are dependent of each other.

The results of the test are given in Table 16.

## DISCUSSION

### Tangibility

The overall tangibility gap score for the tangibility dimension was -0.41, and it was the di-

**Table 16: Chi-square test results for Sizakala Customer Centre giving prompt service and expectation 10, the staff at Sizakala Customer Centre being knowledgeable**

|                    | Value  | df | Asymp. Sig. (2-sided) |
|--------------------|--------|----|-----------------------|
| Pearson Chi-square | 65.744 | 8  | .000                  |

Chi-square test result: ( $\chi^2=65.744$ ;  $\hat{\alpha}=0.05$ ;  $p < 0.0005$ ). Reject  $H_0$  and accept  $H_1$ .

mension that recorded the lowest gap score. The lowest statement gap score for this dimension of service quality was -0.36 and this was for statements that physically facilities are visually appealing. Though the score is negative this implies that customers do find the Sizakala Customer Centre facilities visually appealing, but there's room for improvement.

### Assurance

The overall average gap score for the assurance dimension was found to be -0.52. This was the second lowest average gap score that was measured for the five service quality dimensions. This score indicates that customers were to some degree not satisfied with the assurance part of the Sizakala Customer Centres, since the expectation exceeds perceptions. This further suggests that Sizakala Customer Centre should try and improve on aspects relative to the assurance dimension of service quality. This is also because on the chi-square test done it was indicated that there was a strong relationship between how the customers expected the staff at Sizakala Customer Centre to be knowledgeable and the expectation that, that centre will insist on an error free service. So if there is an improvement in customer assurance, customers will automatically expect that the Sizakala Customer Centre has error free service.

### Empathy

This dimension had an overall gap score of -0.56. The highest statement gap for the empathy dimension of service quality was -0.61 and this was for the statement that Sizakala Customer Centre keeps service levels at the same standard all the time. The Chi square test done indicated that this statement had a strong correla-



tion with Sizakala Customer Centre performing service right the first time. This implies that Management should address the empathy issue as a matter of urgency as it had been tested and proved that if standards are kept the same all the time, even the service therein will be error free.

### **Reliability**

The overall average gap score for the reliability dimension was -0.63 and this was the second highest recorded gap score of the five dimensions. The biggest contributor (-0.75) to the difference between expectation and perceptions in this dimension was the statement that Sizakala Customer Centre keeps to promised response time and the statement (-0.5) that perform service right the first time.

This indicates that Sizakala Customer Centre customers have very little faith in the centre's ability to provide service right the first time and keep to the promised response time. Chi-Square test indicates that there is a significant correlation between the customer expectations on the two statements, suggesting that if Sizakala Customer Centre keeps its promised time customers will therefore expect that they will get right service the first time. This indicates that Sizakala Customer Centre needs to improve their reliability dimension in order to enhance the quality of service that they provide.

### **Responsiveness**

The overall average gap score for the responsiveness dimension was -0.73, and this was the highest recorded gap score of the five dimensions. The biggest contributor (-0.8) to the difference between expectations and perceptions in this dimension was the statement that Sizakala Customer Centre insists on error free service and statement (-0.65) on Sizakala Customer Centre giving prompt service.

This indicates that Sizakala Customer Centre customers have lost faith in their ability to provide prompt and error free service. The Management of the centre needs to improve their responsiveness dimension so as to improve the quality of service delivery as it was also indicated by the Chi-Square test that there was a very strong correlation in customer expectations between Sizakala Customer Centre insisting on er-

ror free service and Sizakala Customer Centre keeping service levels on same standard all the time.

This suggests that Sizakala Customer Centre customers had very high expectations that the service they receive at the centre would be free of errors, and since there was a relationship between the two statements once Sizakala Customer Centre insists that service levels be kept at the same standard all the time, customers will also believe that the service they would receive is error free.

## **CONCLUSION**

This study measured and evaluated service quality in the Sizakala Customer Centres within the Regional Centre's Unit of eThekweni Municipality, and it showed that customer's at the said centres were not satisfied with the service quality rendered there (indicated by the negative SERVQUAL scores). The fact that the results indicated that customers were not satisfied with the service quality does not necessarily mean that the Sizakala Customer Centres are not performing well. The reason being that the scores for perceptions of customers were higher than the middle score meaning that the perceptions were relatively good. In many SERVQUAL studies the "expectations" scores are normally quite high due to a number of reasons one of which might be because of "social desirability" bias, meaning that respondents give answers that they believe the researcher would be expecting to hear, rather than ones that truly accord with their feelings. There are areas that need urgent attention such as the responsiveness and reliability dimensions that had the highest gap score.

## **RECOMMENDATIONS**

Knowing how customers perceive the service quality and being able to measure that service quality can benefit industry professionals in quantitative and qualitative ways. When organisations identify strengths and weaknesses pertaining to the dimensions of service quality they can better allocate resources to improve service especially to external customers. It is however, very difficult for managers to know the best way to achieve service quality as there are lots of strategies that exist and the dilemma is to identify a good one. It is therefore impor-

tant for organisations to understand customer perceptions and expectations so that they are able to satisfy their customers. The following recommendations were made to Management of Sizakala Customer Centres:

Table 8 indicated the average scores between the customer perceptions and expectations and the indication is that customer's are generally not satisfied with the quality of service they receive at Sizakala Customer Centres. The average scores of all statements were negative meaning that there was dissatisfaction. Since there was no positive score it means Management needs to focus on all five dimensions of service quality, namely reliability, tangibility, assurance, responsiveness and empathy to improve the performance. Management can attend to the responsiveness dimension as a matter of urgency as it had the lowest score of all the five dimensions, and the rest of the dimensions.

The Management needs to understand the factors that determine the gap between the expected and perceived service quality. Understanding the factors that determine the gaps between expected and perceived services by organisations will help them to take action towards reducing the difference between the said expected and perceived service, so that customer satisfaction is enhanced.

The Management has to constantly monitor the service quality at the Sizakala Customer Centres. There are a number of techniques that can be used to monitor the service quality. Three categories that these techniques fall under; namely, internal performance analysis; customer satisfaction analysis and specialist market research. For the Sizakala Customer Centres the Management may use the internal performance analysis and customer satisfaction analysis.

The highest average gap score that was identified was for statement number 7 where the Sizakala Customer Centres insist on error free service. It is therefore recommended that programmes and systems be put in place to reduce the number of errors made when delivering service at the centres. Greater attention should be put into training sessions with customer contact employees so as to enhance their customer service skills levels and reduce service errors.

Sometimes organisations can have an influence on the failure of service. They do this by creating false expectations in the minds of customers and their unwillingness to invest in re-

sources necessary to deliver the expected customer service. The researchers therefore recommend that the Management of Sizakala Customer Centre take into cognisance the organisational factors and ensure that the staff have relevant skills and knowledge to handle customer questions, that is, assurance dimension and also that the facilities are well equipped with relevant material and resources, that is, in addressing the tangibility dimension.

Management should inform employees on areas such as, that which expected of them, the goals, strategies and objectives of the organisation. Also service roles and standards should be defined, so that all centres keep service levels at the same standards all the time.

The Management should ensure that the service levels are kept at a same standard across all Sizakala Customer Centres as it was indicated in Table 10 that there was a very strong correlation between the statements that if the service levels are kept at the same standard all the time, customers will then perceive that the centre also keeps to its promised time. It is therefore recommended that Management should review policies and procedures with a view of standardising them across all Centres so as to ensure consistent service delivery.

Management in keeping with the same standards should also put emphasis on ensuring that all Sizakala Customer Centre's facilities are visually appealing, that is having the same "look" as it has been proved (Table 11) that this has a relationship with how the customers would also expect that the material associated with the service to be visually appealing. Customers will also expect an error free service if the standards are the same in all centres.

Management to relook at the importance of turnaround time as if it is kept customers will also believe that the service provided is error free (Table 12).

Since trust and confidence may be embodied in the person who links the customer to the company, it is important that the behaviour of employees instil confidence in customers.

Staff members serving customers in Sizakala Customer Centres should be trained motivated compensated accordingly so as to willingly help customers and provide prompt and error free service to customers. It is therefore recommended that prospective employees at Sizakala Customer Centres be hired based on their technical skills, attitudes and training.

### FUTURE RESEARCH

Research is an on-going phenomenon, and as such there is still a need for further research in areas of quality and customer care. The researchers recommend that, employee expectations and perceptions be considered in future studies, a more comprehensive study that includes all departments within the eThekweni Municipality be conducted so that a comparison between the different Departments can be made and that a comparative study of Customer Centres within Metropolitan municipalities in South Africa be conducted as this would give an indication on how these Customer Centres will rate against each other.

### LIMITATIONS OF THE STUDY

The study is limited to only the "One Stop" Sizakala Customer Services Centre of the eThekweni Municipality. This may not provide a true picture of what is really happening in the municipality in terms of services provided at Customer Service centres, and how customers perceive the quality of service they receive.

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