

IN SEARCH OF
Services Quality

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Introduction

A word “Quality” comes with the highest probability from either Old French *qualite*, or either from Latin *qualitatem*. Universal meaning of quality means “*a level of excellence*”.

Quality in marketing is nothing new – it has been widely used in products marketing. However, economy from many years is transforming, and service sector is still being one of the highest developing segment. It is not surprising, that in case of pure service for sale (banking, education etc.) it is the quality what is dominating in customer’s evaluation. In case of service combined with product (customer service), the quality does tremendously affect total customer satisfaction. It should be kept in mind, that the quality of service is depending on many uncontrolled factors¹.

The quality of tangible products is usually easy to check and easy to define. But the thing is more complex, when talking about services quality. It begins with design, but is present through the whole process on delivery and performing, with assessment during delivery process. Unfortunately, the measurement is not a simple thing, due to many different customers ways of perceptions and expectations. For instance, evaluation of quality of McDonald’s service is definitely not as easy as the quality of its products. This lead to number of theories, which help looking at the quality from wider point of view, therefore making it easier to analyze, maintain and improve a quality. What’s more, it is not easy to express the quality in number, which makes some further complications.

The fact, that we cannot express quality as a single, quantitative feature makes it interesting to explore, how to measure - or more appropriately - how to estimate it. For this purpose there are some methods, that allow to link stages and elements of quality process and quality design to its perceived value. So this is a critical question: how can we define quality, if the service is non-standard and intangible?

My work covers this subject from point of view of customer and company. According to its title (“In search of service quality”), I will try to find out different dimensions and concepts of quality, regarding service design and delivery. This is the content of first part, which is mostly about defining the essence and the concept of service quality. In next parts, I will try to focus on selected methods, which allow to measure

¹ V.A.Zeithaml, M.J.Bitner, *Services marketing: Integrating Fuctomer Focus Accross the Firm*, p. 20

quality in critical point and processes. Comparison between these frameworks and techniques will be done regarding to the dimensions, found in previous parts of work.

In search of Quality

In Ancient Greece Platon claimed, that quality is “simply the inseparable sum of its essential attributes” ². The definition in marketing sense is somehow different. The quality of pure, tangible products is usually strictly connected to its physical features, which are rather easy to observe and measure. For instance, the quality of chocolate can be expressed by smell, flavor, “best before” time and so on. But in case of services, it is the whole process of design, delivery and other impacts of particular service, when its quality is estimated by customer. This is mostly about confronting his or her expectations and desired perception of service. As a result, when expectations are higher than perceived value, the quality is estimated as unacceptable, low. On the other hand, exceeding perceived value makes the service perception as very good with exceptional quality. Nowadays, it is usually really hard to distinguish quality of product from the quality of service, because they are usually mixed (for instance, buying hamburger at fast food restaurant is not only buying hamburger, but also buying service of fast, cheap food, eaten at place or in drive). Nevertheless, it is essential to point out, that quality is built during delivery of service, before delivery (design, concept) and also after delivery (service recovery, impacts and outputs).

In case of service, the quality is mostly experience and credence quality. It means, that it is not easy to search for quality before purchase (like in case of most goods), and what’s more – it is sometimes even hard to search for quality after purchasing and experiencing. It is commonly connected with technical, law or health care services, in which a proper knowledge is required.

Paradox of declining service quality

C.Fishman (“*But wait, you promised...*”, April 2001) and D.Brady (“*Why service stinks*”, October 2000) point out, that the overall perceived overall quality of service is declining, especially in service industry. This may be at first at least weird, as for

² “*Quality (philosophy)*”, from Wikipedia, The Free Encyclopedia, creation date: 15th September 2007, 17:37 by Wikimedia Contributors, accessed 19th October 2007
<[<http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Quality_\(philosophy\)>](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Quality_(philosophy))>

instance in case of health care, transportation, telecommunication services went to the level, which used to be unbelievable ten or twenty years ago. There are some theories to explain this paradox, including for instance:

- It is hard to implement and maintain constant high quality (technological, management and organizational problems), yet many companies promise to achieve it
- Not comprehensive view of service by companies, including lack or fail in trainings, supports etc.
- Cost-cutting strategies
- Sometimes lack of human presence in service delivery (technology, self-service)
- Others

Conclusion from above is, that there is plenty of thing, which should be focused and kept in mind while designing, and handling quality in service processes.

Service quality dimensions

“A conceptual model of Service Quality and Its Implications for Future Research” by Zeithaml and Berry³ defines estimation as a process, in which expected service is defined by not only personal needs, but also past experience and word of mouth. This expected value is confronted with perceived in several dimensions. They were defined by Zeithaml, Parasuraman & Berry in mid eighties, this model is either known as SERVQUAL or RATER (from first beginning letters). Dimensions of quality, according to this theory are:

Reliability

This refers to trust to company’s ability of performing service in a proper way. It is one of the most important dimensions, in which quality is perceived. Basically, reliability means, that company can act, according to its promises and declarations. It also means performing precisely with schedule, doing things at agreed conditions, finally respecting and obeying other rules.

³ A conceptual Model of Service Quality and its implications for Future Research, A. Parasuraman, V.A.Zeithaml, L.L.Berry, *Journal of Marketing* 49, Fall 1985, p.48

For example, let's focus on fictional internet service provider. In this context, reliability means, that internet connection is working at desired level of throughput, without significant failures, according to declarations and agreement between provider and user.

Assurance

Assurance is connected to employees knowledge of their abilities and confidence. The thing is about to build trust and loyalty between company and its customers. It is mostly noticeable in services, which are connected to risk (financial, medical, legal), because trust and confidence are embodied into representatives of the company. But because of intangibility of this feature, customer usually take into account some more tangible evidences of assurance – like certificates, references, awards or certifications.

Internet service provider assurance can be built for instance by references (including non-written), well-known brand, recommendations etc.

Tangibles

Tangibility refers to everything in company, that can be physically observed by customer, who is purchasing a service, including equipment, personnel, physical facilities, materials and appearance. It is especially important, because first look may often decide whether customer buys or not service from that particular companies. Furthermore, it is very common when customer don't have any cues how to estimate the quality of service, and treat this cues as some kind of estimators. For instance, splendor room, where bank agreements are signed makes better impression than poor one, although it may have nothing in common with the quality of its pure service (interest, safety etc.).

Again, internet service provider tangibles may be represented by well-skilled first-line personnel, the quality of additional products (modems), brochures and cards, appearance of repair truck and so on.

Empathy

Empathy refers to “caring individualized attention to customers”⁴. It is rather obvious, that customers want to be understood - it is usually in companies’ first-line strategy to make him or her feel like very important to company. This is why smaller companies are commonly perceived as more knowledgeable about customer (for instance, first-line employees do know customers by name, their case and history of problems).

For instance, if a failure of internet is reported, company can record the problem in a database. In future, it will be possible to view the history of customer’s problems, making advice and help more direct, more precise, easier and – what is essential in the context – customer will feel more understood.

Responsiveness

Responsiveness is more or less a willingness to provide support service. It emphasizes the way, how company is reacting, when complaint, request or problem comes. It can be measured by amount of time needed to deal with particular problem, estimated level of satisfaction from answer/feedback response. For instance, the longer time needed to wait in queue or for e-mail response this feature is more diminishing.

As an example, responsiveness of internet service provider can be measured by time, in which failures are fixed, time it takes to report a failure and so on.

The problem with SERVQUAL is, that it does not provide any measurement tool. What’s more, it has been criticized, that it does not refer to outcome, only to delivery process⁵. Furthermore, criticisms “include the use of difference scores, dimensionality, applicability and the lack of validity of the model, especially with respect to the dependence or independence of the five main variables”⁶.

Original SERVQUAL model by Parasuraman (1985)⁷ identified additional five factors:

⁴ *Attitudes to service quality – the expectation gap*, Lesley Douglas, Robert Connor, published in *Nutrition & Food Science*, ISSN: 0034-6659, 2003/33 issue: 4 , p. 167

⁵ Grönroos, 1990; Mangold and Babakus, 1991

⁶ *Service quality dimensions: an examination of Grönroos’s service quality model*, Gi-Du Kang and Jeffrey James, published in *Managing Service Quality* , 14/2004 issue 4, page: 266

⁷ Buttle F., “*SERVQUAL: review, critique, research agenda*” in *European Journal of Marketing*, 30/1996 issue: 1 page 9

- Competence
- Access
- Courtesy
- Communication
- Credibility

Other concepts

Oakland’s definition of quality says, that quality is “a way of managing business processes to ensure complete consumer satisfaction at every stage, internally and externally”⁸. Other authors, like Johnston cited by Goetsch and Davis say, the quality “encompasses every aspect of your business and is actually an emotional experience for the consumer. Consumers want to feel good about their purchases, to feel that they have received the best value. Consumers will take pride in their association with a company with a high *quality image*”.

Quality for whom?			
Quality of what?	Customers	Employees	Owners
Outcome			
Process			
Prerequisites for the service			

Bo Edwardson in his publication “Service Quality Improvement” claims, that “it is often appropriate to distinguish three groups of people whose expectations, needs and demands should be taken into account; apart from customers, these are employees and owners. We do not want to play down the importance of customers’ perception of quality – on the contrary – but to be able to offer customers the right quality, the other two groups must also be satisfied”⁹. According to this theory, it is essential to build service quality, bearing in mind needs and expectations of various groups, which may seem to be contradictory at first.

⁸ Cited by *Attitudes to service quality – the expectation gap*, Lesley Douglas, Robert Connor, published in *Nutrition & Food Science*, ISSN: 0034-6659, 2003/33 issue: 4 , p. 166

⁹ Edwardson Bo, *Service Quality Improvement*, published in *Managing Service Quality* Volume 8 Number 2 1998, p. 144

Furthermore, another theory is presented by Dong Kyoon Yoo and Jeong Ah Park in their publication¹⁰ - according to this one, quality can be achieved and therefore perceived from view of four factors: employees (their capabilities of delivering service), perceived service quality (“The extent to which a firm success serves the purpose of customers”), customers’ satisfaction, needs or desires, and finally financial performance

Those all theories seem to be not excluding, but rather supporting. Common conclusion essentially would be, that quality cannot be perceived from one point of view. Quality of service is very wide issue, which usually may not be covered under name of one process. Implication of this fact include wider look, and more comprehensive view over the subject, in order to have most accurate knowledge about what is good-quality and what is not in our service.

The model of quality gaps

A critical point, when quality of service is estimated by customer is, when it comes to confrontation (encountering) between his or her expectations, and perceived value of service. This difference between customer perception and customer expectation is called a Quality Gap. It is however not the only gap, rather the last one in a process of establishing and delivering service.

This model helps to understand, where quality comes from, where should we put our attention, and gives possible basis for further measurements.

Gap 1: lack of knowledge what customer expects

First gap occurs, when customers expectations are confronted to managers’ ability to predict and formulate needs and expectations - it is connected to managers’ awareness of customer desires and needs. This gap - when occurs - is called “a market research quality gap” or “positioning gap”.

The first gap is very important, because bad decision at the beginning of the process will surely affect next steps of the process of service design and delivery, leading to

¹⁰ Dong Kyoon Yoo, Jeong Ah Park, “*Perceived service quality: Analyzing relationships among employees, customers, and financial performance*”, published in *International Journal of Quality & Reliability Management*, 2007/24 issue 9, page 910

wrong performance of service or not fulfilled customer expectations. The gap is larger, the less accurate information from research managers have. So, the essential factor here is lack or inadequate market research, or lack of understanding of customer expectations, need or desires.

Lack of company strategies of maintaining relationships with customers may also make this gap bigger. Focusing only on new customers may lead to situation, when company is blind when changing needs of existing customers are taken into account. Also, very important factor to company is service recovery, which let company understand – what is going wrong, what is being complained about, how it should be going on. Therefore it helps with keeping and developing new strategies for eliminating service failures.

Gap 2: wrong choice of service design / standard

Second gap - called “design gap” or “specification gap” - arises during process of formulating and transforming the results of market research into specific targets and particular ideas. Example of this kind of situation would be, when new service is invented and managers claim it would fulfill expectations of customers, while in fact it doesn't or does only partially.

The reasons why this gap is existing are different, but very common situation is, when managers claim, that what customer expects is unrealistic and unreasonable (this is wrong – it is commonly known, that it is the customer who knows best what he wants, not manager or employer or whoever). Also, it is sometimes believed, that setting standards does not give anything, and therefore is waste of time. It is however not true, because standards give the vision for service, allow to improve it according to some predefined values and paths, finally, the quality of service will after all be estimated according to set of standards.

Therefore, to minimize this gap it is important to have good communication between all levels of workers (from managers to front-line employees), so as they have the same concept, based on standards of quality.

Gap 3: no consistency to service standard

If actual delivery of service does not meet management statements, the it comes to the conformance gap (also called communication gap). Common reasons of this gap are lack of teamwork, not well recruited personnel, bad job design etc.

Even if standards perfectly describe what customer want, it is obvious, that they must be fulfilled and applied to each process of design and delivery, to achieve full consistency with customer needs. The things are no different at all, if company doesn't have full control over process of delivery – for instance in case of franchising or some intermediaries, it is up to them to keep standards, and if one of sides fails, the quality of service won't go along with standards.

Standards must have a proper basis on proper resources, including people, technology etc. Ensuring that company has proper resources let minimize this gap.

Gap 4: difference between promise and real performance

Last gap before discrepancy of perception and expectation is about difference between service (as it is delivered) and form of external communications, including promises with no cover or no information available.

The most common reasons of gap 4 is lack of understanding about how service works and what is actually. This is a common reason of exaggerated promises (like in advertising), failures of communication with customers and providing information, which can serve them well. So it is essential to have good external communication and so-called “interactive marketing” (the marketing between customers and first-line employees). Effective coordination real service delivery with external communication narrows gap 4 (and also can affect the next gap, which is mostly about confrontation between needs affected by promises and real service performance).

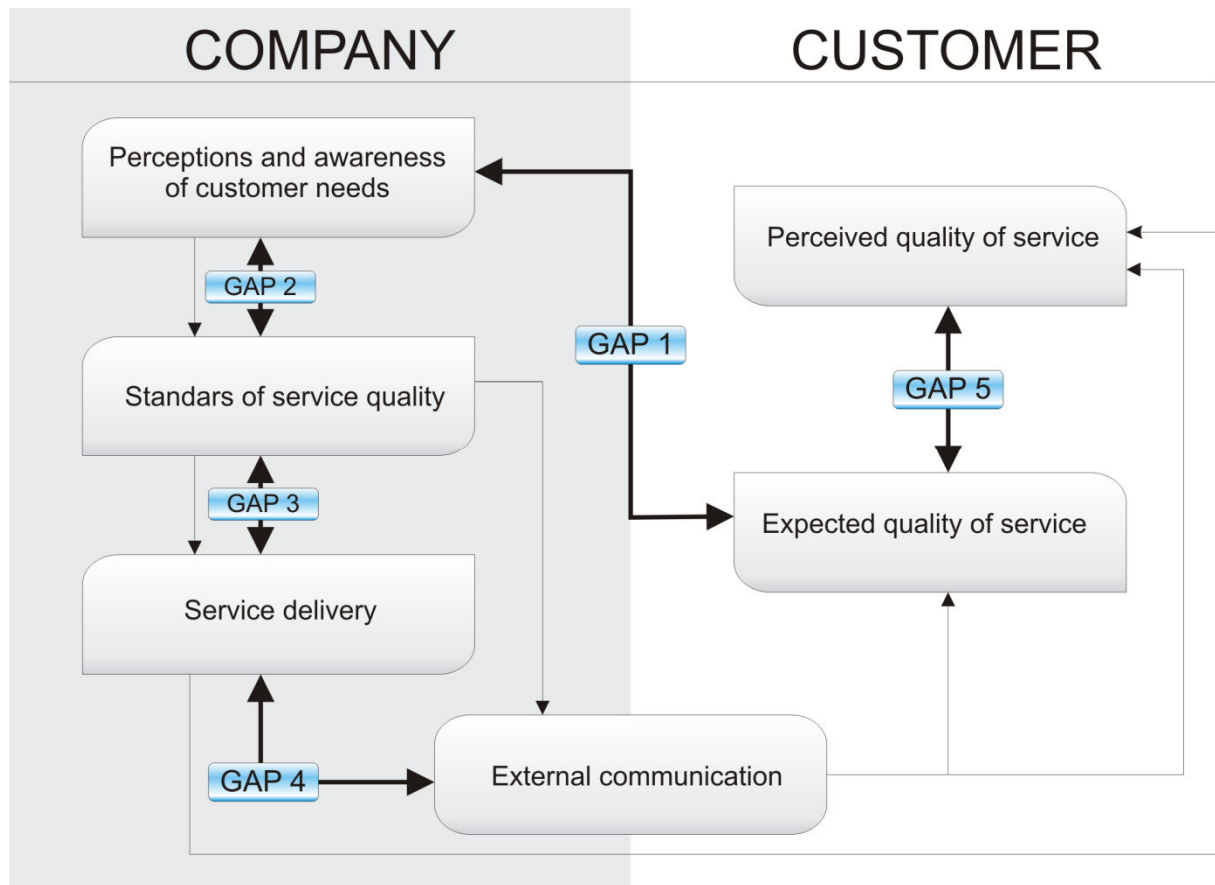
Gap 5 (central): difference between customer expectation and perception

The most important gap in Integrated Gaps Model of Service Quality is gap number 5. Firm must close it or keep it at the lowest possible level to achieve customer satisfaction from delivered service. To close this gap, previous gaps also should be closed or just minimized.

Central customer gap can also be analyzed in wider perspective. James L. Walker (1995)¹¹ claims, that the overall service encounter can be presented as a function of three stages: service peripheral encounter, core service encounter and peripherals encounter.

¹¹ *Service encounter satisfaction: conceptualized*, James L. Walker, Journal of Services Marketing; Volume: 9 Issue: 1; 1995

This sequence of five gaps lead to a model, that should be the strongly taken into account while formulating strategy for service design and delivery. The point is to try to keep the gaps as low as it is possible.¹²



Again, this model of quality gaps cannot be easily measurable and verifiable as in case of simple tangible product. The thing is, that unlike physical features (which can be objectively measured, for instance durability, strength), we also need to handle many psychological, intangible features (like comfort of flight). Also, many of services quality beyond immediate encounter, as for example in case of health care, which has a tremendous impact on further life.

Measuring quality

To identify a measure for quality, a versatile view of service system is “a must”. There are many theories of showing perspectives for service quality, I will focus on two popular. The five view-perspective in which a quality can be viewed can be: content, process, structure, outcome and impact.

¹² Based on Professor Utrayan Bagchi University of Texas works

Content	That point of view ensures, that standard procedures of delivering service are fulfilled. We also ask, if particular procedures of routine service product are followed by personnel.
Process	This view let answer to question, if sequence of event and related services resources are logical and appropriate. It helps pointing problems with coordination of activities and sequences of actions. Interaction between customer and employee is being monitored.
Structure	In this point we focus on structure and answer, if it is well organized and adequate for particular service, also employees qualification and skills are taken into account. The adequacy of physical factor can be checked in a form of comparison to standards
Outcome	Complaints of customer are one of the most effective ways of outcome quality dimension. This study checks, what is affected by service, is customer satisfied or not. Also, a measure of outcome quality could be satisfaction of employees from their own performance.
Impact	Impact view is all about what is the long-run effect of the service.

Of course, in case of some services some points may be less significant, while other may be more important. Health care and education for example beyond quality of core service and outcome will have relatively high weight of impact, while lawyer service will have high significance of process and structure. One way or another, this division is one of way of measuring quality, by looking at different elements of service.

What is important here, that is includes outcome as one of perspective, which was lacking in pure SERVQUAL model.

Another division is captured by Brady and Cronin in theirs publication¹³. The view of service quality was split into:

- Service quality as **outcome quality**
- Service quality as **interaction quality**
- Service quality as **physical environment**

¹³ Brady M.K and Cronin J.J “Some new thoughts on conceptualizing perceived Service Quality: A hierarchical approach” in *Journal of Marketing*, issue 65

As Zeithaml and Bitner point out, “in some cases, as with restaurant services, all three aspects of service are likely to be important to the overall assessment of the quality. Other times, as in case of a kiosk-based ticketing service, only technical outcome and physical environment quality are likely to come into play in the consumer’s evaluation process”¹⁴. Another thing is technical quality, which may be not always easy to measure and verify – like in case of lawyer or health services – technical outcome is very hard to assess for typical customer.

Here, a statistics comes with help. Some processes can be illustrated by control chart. It is the way of graphical presentation for one time or other constant to variable, affecting the quality. Fitzimmons¹⁵ present example of ambulance response chart, showing the mean length of response in specific time. Statistical control chart let examine factors, which may possible be truly degrading the quality. Complicated calculations may show the trend, and distinguish temporary variations from real degradation of quality. What is worth to point out here is, that control chart is based on measurable numbers (time in above example), therefore conclusion from research are based on precise measurement, helping to avoid errors and misunderstandings there.

Service design and quality tools and techniques

The problem with quality of either product or service is, that it cannot be added into them in a single, distinguishable process. The quality implementation last for the whole process of designing and delivering service to customer. Because quality is often explained as “conformance to requirements”¹⁶, there must be some clear, explicitly defined terms, which can define what is the requirement, and measure what is the conformance to them. When there is a deviation from requirement, the corrective measures of action-oriented activity is coming as a quality concept.

¹⁴ Zeithaml V.A, Bitner M.J, “*Services marketing: Integration Customer Focus Accros The Firm*”, 3rd edition, p. 93

¹⁵ Fitzimmons J. & M., “*Service Management – Operations, Strategy, Information Technology*”, fifth edition, page 151

¹⁶ Definition presented in a book by Philip B. Crosby, *Quality is Free: The Art of Making Quality Certain*

SERVQUAL

Previously described SERVQUAL model is an instrument, which captures multiple dimensions, handling effective tool for measuring customer satisfaction, basing on gap model. Its most important function is to “*track service quality trends through periodic customer surveys*”¹⁷. It is divided into two parts, with sections for records of customer perception of some class of services, and followed by record of particular firm’s service quality. Each part consist of several sentences, for which the scale of ratings is from 1 (strongly disagree) to 7 (strongly agree), and the total score is the difference in particular ratings for sentences of same group. The result will act as Gap 5 from previous model, but it can also be extended to other gaps. This is very simple framework for measuring the quality, more comprehensive solutions are presented further.

Quality Function Deployment (QFD)

It is obvious, that products should fulfill customer requirements to be successful. One of the techniques of achieving that is called Quality Function Deployment.

This technique was invented in 1960s in Japan, and was extensively used by well known companies (like Toyota). Its purpose is to transform “customer needs (the voice of the customer [VOC]) into engineering characteristics (and appropriate test methods) of a product or service, prioritizing each product/service characteristic while simultaneously setting development targets for product or service development”¹⁸. It is believed it helps to have product/service desired to customer expectation and desires, and to achieve that there must be a coordination between all stages of delivering (from manufacturing and design to marketing).

The results of QFD process is presented in matrix, called “The House of Quality”, which relates attributes from customer point of view to attributes and characteristics from engineer point of view. Although having been constructed for tangible products purposes, it may be efficiently and effectively used in services delivery process.

¹⁷ *Service Management – Operations, Strategy, Information Technology*, James and Mona Fitzsimmons, fifth edition, page 133

¹⁸ Quality function deployment. (2007, October 15). In Wikipedia, The Free Encyclopedia. Retrieved 08:17, October 17, 2007, from http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Quality_function_deployment

There are nine steps in QFD process:

1. Establishing aim of the project

2. Determine expectations of customers

A company should make a research (interview, questionnaires etc.) to find out what are the requirements, what is desired quality for customers. All the factors are represented as rows in “house of quality”, like in example below: innovations, quality, honest and open company, effectiveness etc. These features can also be grouped into more sophisticated divisions defining primary, secondary and tertiary

3. Finding out components of the service

Columns contain these elements, which can be changed and manipulated by management, so as to fulfill customer requirements. Below example has for instance price-to-win, corporate teamwork, vertical integration or quality management leadership etc., all of the are divided into different categories.

4. Estimating strength of connections

The triangles in head and body of house of quality are for notation of strength between two selected things. Symbols of strength are subject to change, but most important thing is that these step provides clear correlation and points of leverage to improve service process quality.

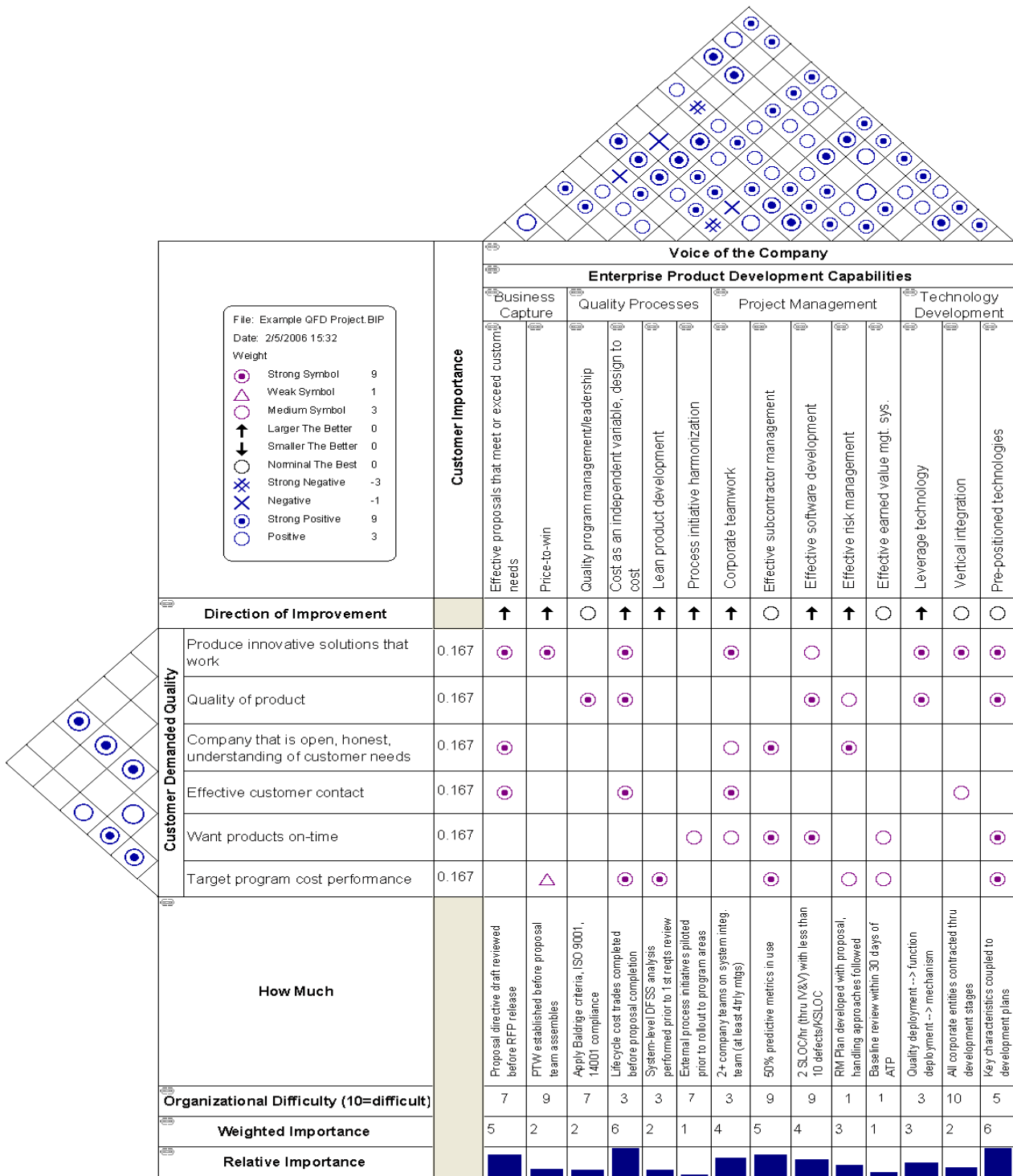
5. Associate customer expectations and service elements

The body of house of quality contain numbers, indicating strength of link between selected elements from customer expectations, and service elements. Scale is again subject to change, but it should be as much precise as it is possible. For instance, there is a strong connection between vertical integration (service element) and innovation (customer expectation), and weak between target program cost performance and price-to-win. This step tells managers, how different elements of service affect satisfaction of needs by company’s service.

6. Weights

Each of customer expectations from rows of the matrix should be weighted, and its importance in some predefined scale should be noted (this can be found out from surveys, interviews etc). Example below shows a case, where all the factors are equally important, their weights are 0.167, which eventually

gives 1 as a sum of weights. Again, scale is subject to change, it won't change anything in mathematical sense.



The weighted score of each service element is multiplication of weight of customer expectations by strength of connection, and is denoted in the footer of house of quality. For instance, weighted importance of price-to-win is 2. Of course, due to fact, that strength and importance are only estimated, and cannot be founded precisely, we should always treat them with a sense of caution.

7. Rank the difficulty

Company should note the difficulty level of improving particular elements of service. This may show, that what is really valuable in service elements does not always need to be easy or possible to deliver. In example below, vertical integration is very hard to improve (10 in 1-10 scale)

8. Conclusions and modifications

The basement of house of quality gives clue to managers, where and what to improve. High weighted score may tell, it is what we should start with, as it is most important (like in example below, the prepositioned technologies seem to be the most important factor. Comparisons with competitors may also give clue, where do we have superior, and what to deal with in next order.

What is good about Quality Function Deployment is, that it gives a comprehensive, versatile view on quality and let focus on most important factors in quality management. However, the problem is that many factors, which are not quantitative but must be presented by concrete number. For instance, a manager has to estimate in numbers the importance and difficulty of factors, customer's expectations also have to be expressed by number. This makes estimation unlikely to be 100% reliable.

Walk-through audit

Customer is active participant in service process. Therefore, environmental audit can be used to measure his or her view and satisfaction from service. Walk through audit is a process, developed by Fitzimmons and Maurer ¹⁹. They developed audit, consisting of 42 questions for chain of restaurants. The purpose of walk-through audit is to trace customer experience from the beginning to the end of the process.

¹⁹ Fitzimmons J.A, Maurer G.B “*Walk-through audit to improve restaurant performance*”, in *Conrell HRA Quarterly*, 02/1991

To make walk-through audit, managers need to point out, what are the levels and dimensions, in which customer is interacting with the process. From each part of levels, there should be some statements formulated, which should have positive meaning. For instance, in case of internet service provider, a section considering the quality of internet connection itself could be:

Internet connection

	Strongly disagree	Disagree	Not sure	Agree	Strongly agree
The speed of internet connection is sufficient.	1	2	3	4	5
Internet connection is trouble-free	1	2	3	4	5
Internet connection is secure	1	2	3	4	5

Technical service

	Strongly disagree	Disagree	Not sure	Agree	Strongly agree
Help from our specialist is immediate	1	2	3	4	5
It does not take much time between reporting and repairing the failure	1	2	3	4	5
Our employees are reliable	1	2	3	4	5
Our online FAQ helps solving most common daily problems	1	2	3	4	5
Our staff is kind and willing to help	1	2	3	4	5

Regarding different types of services, there may be different number of sections and questions. It is good to leave some empty field for other comments, which customer can provide. It has also been proven, that length of the survey cannot be too long, as it

may discourage from participate in. The maximum is one page, printed on both side, in case of printed survey.

Audit can be performed either using traditional, printed questionnaire, either internet or even by telephone. Many companies provide encourage customer to participate by offering some gifts or money discounts for the product – it can increase participation to desired level.

The purpose of walk-through-audit is to consider a view from customers' point of view, which can be easily overlooked by managers. It is so, because customers are more sensible, and can have fresher look on some things, that managers and employees do. After all, this tool helps to measure the difference in gap, between managers' and customers' perceptions.

Conclusions

Quality of service is very important. In pure services for sale, it is one of determinant, whether people are purchasing the service or not. On the other hand, in case of customer service, service connected to product is expected to be at desired level of quality. However, quality of service cannot be defined in one universal way. It is very complex feature, which covers several issues from designing a service to customer total satisfaction from it. There are plenty of different theories, and much more to discover still. The very basic model of defining quality is SERVQUAL, in which it is defined in 5 perspectives (reliability, assurance, tangibles, empathy, responsiveness). It has been however criticized for too simplistic view, lack of outcome perspective, different dimensions and score and that it does not provide any measurement tool.

Second very important issue is model of quality gaps, which shows where are possible critical moments for quality to be held. This model presents five gaps, from design of service up to its delivery and total difference between expectations and perceived value of customer. Again, this concept does not provide any tool for measurement.

Finally, there are frameworks which connects SERVQUAL features with lacking outcome and impact, having in mind gaps in quality process, and providing tools and frameworks for measurement of quality. In my work I presented for instance Quality Function Deployment, which is a concrete framework, based on “the house of quality”. House of quality is precise in pointing out, what is important and what should be worked out. It gives result in numbers, which means some qualitative factors are expressed in quantitative features.

Another very common technique is walk-through-audit, which is basically about getting to know customer point of view on each stage of interaction, from the beginning to the end of the process. Walk-through audit is simpler to perform than QFD, but it doesn't give such precise results as house of quality.

The problem with all these methods and techniques is, that the quality of service is qualitative feature, therefore it can be only estimated by numbers and scores – probably, it won't ever be 100% reliable. Still, it can be used as estimation and direction in which company should follow, because one hand or another the experience of the customer is the very important thing, and no one can ever claim, that he or she knows better than customers.

So it seems, that complexity of the problem of service quality makes managers to use different methods of measuring quality and different perspectives of perceiving. Each step in delivering service is important, and we cannot exaggerate any of them and not focus on another.

So, the answer for problem I focused - "In search of quality" - would be: the quality is everywhere and always – the thing is to capture it, and measure in appropriate way where is our service quality strong, and where (and why?) the quality is leaking. This will make the basis for success of service.

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