

# THE HINDU Business Line

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## Service quality and why it slips

As we all know, service quality is one of the most important elements in creating customer loyalty. However, delivering great service is easier said than done. Let us examine why service quality drops by identifying the stages in the process where gaps could occur. I am borrowing the term gaps from a framework called SERVQUAL developed by Dr. A Parasuraman.

The first possible gap is something basic — maybe the company doesn't understand what the customer is looking for. This lack of understanding could take one or more of three basic forms:

The company doesn't know what facilities are considered as basic must-haves and what are seen by customers as offering additional value (for e.g. printed bill statements are seen as must-haves, but SMS-based one-on-one query addressing are seen as value-adds).

The company offers lower-than-desired levels of delivery on quantifiable parameters (e.g. the time taken to resolve complaints).

The company personnel are seen to lack in deportment and communication skills (for e.g., the perception that the customer is not given due respect).

Once the customer's expectations are understood AND acted upon, the next gap could occur when laying down performance specifications. For example, a hair dressing saloon opens at 7 a.m. though it knows that customers expect it to be open at 6 a.m. But since its staff can reach the saloon only at 7 a.m., the quality standards lay down that the saloon would open at 7 a.m.

Now, even if the saloon opens at 7 a.m., it may not be ready to service customers immediately. Considering that personnel walk in at 7 sharp, by the time they clean up and lay out the equipment, they can service customers only at 7.15. This represents the third kind of gap — where the quality standards are laid down but the personnel do not stick to it due to sheer non-performance or, at times, because of systemic constraints. Besides there is one more gap, the perception gap, which is not easily measured. It works differently for different people and may work differently for the same person at different times. For instance, if I have a relaxed day at work, I would probably shrug off a 15-minute delay. On the other hand, the same delay could upset me on a busy day. Thus, though the actual gap in the two cases is the same, the customer's perception of service quality is quite different.

More details about these gaps can be had from our Website under the C Metric section

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