A conceptual model of consumer evaluation of recreation service quality

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The paper develops a model which is intended to explain the process by which a consumer evaluates recreation service quality. Much of the difficulty in measuring the quality of recreation services can be attributed to their intangibility, heterogeneity, and the inseparability of their production and consumption functions. Dimensions of recreation services are operationalized in the article, and the criteria used by consumers for evaluating recreation service quality are discussed. Recreation service quality is defined as the outcome of a comparison between expectations of a service and what is perceived to be received. Since much of the reported work in the area of service quality has been undertaken in a commercial context, key differences in the public and commercial sectors which may impact consumers’ expectations of recreation services are discussed and integrated into the model.

 Provision of consistent high quality recreation services is a major challenge. In order to maintain service quality, or improve it, an agency must first identify what it is that constitutes quality to those whom it serves (Gronroos, 1983). After discussing the difficulties endemic in assessing recreation service quality, this paper describes the elements which affect consumers’ evaluations of recreation services and integrates them into a model which is intended to explain the process by which consumers evaluate recreation service quality.

Difficulties in measuring recreation service quality

The concept of recreation service quality is not easily defined or measured (Parasuraman et al., 1985). Much of the difficulty stems from three distinctive features which are unique to services. These features of intangibility, heterogeneity and inseparability of production and consumption (Zeithaml et al., 1985) are present to varying degrees in every service.

Services are performed and experienced (Berry, 1980; Shostack, 1977) and although the performance of most services is aided by tangibles (such as swimming pools in the provision of swimming lessons), what is actually purchased or obtained is the experience. Intangibility is in essence what differentiates a service from a product, which is purchased and literally taken in hand. This makes it difficult for agencies to understand how patrons evaluate their services. Intangibility can make it difficult for service providers to exercise the control necessary to offer uniform quality of service delivery. Most services cannot be evaluated by an agency in advance to ensure a quality experience (Parasuraman et al., 1985).
Heterogeneity refers to the potential for variability in recreation service delivery. This is especially prominent when a substantial labour component is involved (Berry, 1980). The quality of services is largely dependent on the actions of people (Sinha and Willborn, 1985). The quality of interactions between personnel and customers is likely to vary among staff members and from day to day. This can create a gap between what the agency plans to deliver and what the customer actually encounters.

The third characteristic, inseparability of production and consumption, describes how recreation services are often rendered and experienced simultaneously (Berry, 1980). This usually requires the presence of both the consumer and the provider during the delivery process. Evaluations of quality of performance are made at this stage (Parasuraman et al., 1985). Because the consumer often participates in production of a recreation service (e.g., tennis lessons) the performance and its subsequent quality can be affected by the consumer’s actions, mood and co-operativeness (Zeithaml, 1981).

Operationalizing service quality

Service quality has been characterized by a variety of management oriented definitions (Faulds and Curry, 1985; Fitzsimmons and Sullivan, 1982; McLain and Thomas, 1980). The subjective nature of recreation service quality has led management to define, describe, and delimit it in quantifiable, objective, but often arbitrary, standards (LaPage, 1983).

Klaus (1985) proposes that service quality may be explained in physical, situational, and behavioural terms; that is, what is delivered, the circumstances of the delivery, and how it is delivered. He argues that service quality standards are commonly determined by providers’ past experiences, and that they most often reflect the physical and technical aspects of a service because these are most easily measurable. This outcome-oriented definition has been termed technical quality (Upah et al., 1983).

An alternative approach to assessing service quality has been to measure functional quality, which is the manner in which a service is delivered (Upah et al., 1983). This aspect has been proposed as being a more important criterion of quality for consumers. Even if the facility is clean and the programme which is delivered meets high operational standards (technical quality), a negative impression can be generated through poor employee-customer interaction (functional quality). This negative impression can cause well-executed technical quality aspects to be overlooked (Solomon et al., 1985).

Recent research using a multi-attribute approach has integrated the technical and functional components. Parasuraman et al. (1985) identified over 200 attributes of service quality. The pool of attributes was derived from an extensive series of interviews with customers in four different commercial services. Using factor analysis five main dimensions of service quality were identified. They were: tangibles, reliability, assurance, responsiveness and empathy.

Tangibles represent the physical facilities, equipment, appearance of personnel and presence of other users. Tangibles can create atmosphere. The tangible dimension of a service is one of the few things that a potential service patron can know and evaluate in advance.

Reliability refers to the ability accurately. The key is the promotion of efforts can contrive performance at the highest station.

Responsiveness is the willingness attention. Agency patrons expectly.

Assurance indicates courteous and confidence. Assurance contra security. Credibility is another evaluated in advance of participation competence of agency personnel.

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Criteria for evaluating recreation

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Reliability refers to the ability to perform the promised service dependably and accurately. The key is the promised service. Promises made through an agency’s promotional efforts can contribute to participant expectations. Consistency of performance at the highest standard is important to reliability.

Responsiveness is the willingness to help participants and provide prompt attention. Agency patrons expect their requests to be handled quickly and accurately.

Assurance indicates courteous and knowledgable employees who convey trust and confidence. Assurance contains elements of agency credibility, competence and security. Credibility is another of the few items regarding a service that can be evaluated in advance of participation. It is a reflection of the knowledge and competence of agency personnel. Assurance can assist in the reduction of perceived risk of participation.

The empathy dimension includes caring and individual attention to users. Empathy expresses an understanding of the participants’ needs.

Perceptions of quality by those who provide services and those who consume them often have been reported to differ (Klaus, 1985; Reynolds and Jamieson, 1985; Parasuraman et al., 1985). In such cases, attributes are transformed by management into service performance standards which may not be consistent with consumers’ perceptions and experiences (LaPage, 1983). An agency may not always be attuned to what constitutes high quality to its customers, so managers make decisions based on their own perceptions and preferences (Foster and Jackson, 1979). For example, LaPage (1983), working in the area of camping, suggests that there is increasing evidence of substantial differences between managerial and user perceptions of ideal locations, designs, facilities, supervision and maintenance of parks.

Solomon et al. (1985) concluded that a customer assesses service quality by his or her perception of the way in which the service is performed. As a result, service quality has been defined as the outcome of a comparison between expectations of a service and what is perceived to be received (Czepiel et al 1985; Klaus, 1985; Parasuraman et al., 1985). The gap between expectation and perception of performance determines the level of service quality from a consumer’s perspective.

This definition resembles definitions of satisfaction as suggested by expectancy and discrepancy theories (Greenleaf et al., 1984). However, service quality is argued to be distinct from satisfaction (Parasuraman et al, 1986; Oliver, 1981). Satisfaction is purported to relate to a specific recreation experience, whereas service quality is indicative of a pervasive attitude formed as a result of experiencing several recreation experiences. The two concepts are, however, related. Repeated satisfaction will result in a perception of high service quality (Parasuraman et al., 1986; Lewis and Booms, 1983).

Criteria for evaluating recreation service quality

The abstract nature of recreation service quality makes it difficult for consumers to articulate and evaluate (Zeithaml, 1981). Much of this difficulty arises from the previously discussed characteristics of intangibility, heterogeneity and inseparability
of production and consumption. In addition, because of their experiential nature, recreation services lack durability which is a feature often linked with quality in products (Lewis and Booms, 1983).

Zeithaml (1981) distinguishes three types of properties which are integral to consumer evaluation processes in services. These are search, experience, and credence properties. Recreation programmes illustrating these properties are included in Fig. 1.

Search properties apply to those attributes which a consumer evaluates before engaging in the service. These properties are primarily tangibles which are physical representations of the service, such as facilities, equipment, appearance of personnel and other recipients of the service.

Experience properties refer to attributes which can only be specified during or after consumption of the recreation service. They are usually present in highly people-based services, such as special events. Services high in experience properties are more difficult to evaluate than those which are facility based, such as tennis.

Credence properties are those characteristics which are beyond the capability of the consumer to evaluate, even after consumption. For example, in a swimming pool setting, a user is unlikely to possess the knowledge to judge whether or not the lifeguards have been properly trained. Services high in credence properties are the hardest to evaluate. These properties predominate in services delivered by specialists or professional (Smith and Houston, 1983) because of the high level of expertise usually required to perform such services. The recreation field includes many such specialists in activities such as scuba diving, rock climbing, hang gliding, and tole painting which may be considered high in credence properties.

The majority of recreation services, due to their intangibility, are low in search properties and high in experience properties (Zeithaml, 1981). The heterogeneity characteristic of services heightens the relative importance of experience properties because of the inevitable variability in recreation service delivery from one occasion to another.

Examination of search, experience and credence properties reveals that evaluation of recreation service quality is both process and output oriented (Fitzsimmons and Sullivan, 1982). Recreation services are mostly experiential in nature. The
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inseparability of production and consumption fosters evaluation of service quality
both during and after service delivery. The consumer, as participant, is an integral
part of the service enabling him or her to make an assessment while the service is
being performed, as well as after it has been performed.

Differences between public and commercial sector services which affect consumers’
expectations of recreation service quality

Most of the work which has been reported on service quality has been undertaken
in the commercial sector. There is some evidence to indicate differences in people’s
perceptions of quality in public and commercial sector service delivery (Groenhag
and Arndt, 1979). Certainly, any attempt to conceptualize service quality in the
context of public recreation has to recognize the substantial differences which exist
between the delivery of public and commercial services.

A primary factor which differentiates the public sector from the commercial
sector is the absence of the profit motive. Public services are less dominated by
financial objectives. Producing revenue or raising funds is the means to an end, not
the end in itself (Lovelock and Weinberg, 1984), by contrast with commercial
firms, which are dependent upon profits for their continuation and success.
Businesses know that a high quality service attracts new customers and retains
present ones. This in turn generates profits (Churchill and Suprenant, 1983) and
explains the commercial sector’s interest in the concept of service quality.

In the public sector, the service quality issue is important because participant
satisfaction through high quality service has been identified as a mandate (Foster
and Jackson, 1979). Human satisfaction is the ultimate goal, not the vehicle for
achieving a profit (Bultena and Klessig, 1969). This service rather than profit focus
makes performance evaluation more difficult (Lovelock and Weinberg, 1984).

The public sector cannot ignore small, unable to pay, or geographically dispersed
population segments (Lovelock, 1981). The inability of such groups to self-fund
services requires public agencies to seek financial resources from sources other than
direct users of the service. In addition, the public nature of recreation services limits
the extent to which fees can be increased or implemented as a revenue generator,
because vote conscious politicians often perceive that such a strategy may cause
vociferous resistance from constituents (Crompton and Lamb, 1986).

The public sector frequently has multiple constituencies to satisfy (Lovelock and
Weinberg, 1984), including not only the users, but also the public at large, the
agency’s personnel and politicians. The priorities of these groups may not be
congruent (Lovelock and Weinberg, 1984), a situation which can lead to tension
between the mission of the agency and consumers’ satisfaction. For example, by
improving recreation service quality and promoting this, the agency may raise
consumer expectations thereby creating a conflict with the public’s expectations of
low taxation (Lamb, 1985). This can lead to consumer and overall public dissatis-
faction as an agency becomes engulfed in conflict between resource providers and
service users (Yorke, 1984).

In the public sector, unlike the commercial sector, the idea of service quality
frequently includes notions of accessibility, equity and respect for the individual
(Klaus, 1985). Government is largely open to public scrutiny and political process.
Its activities are more heavily influenced by external forces, such as media and special interest groups (Crompton and Lamb, 1986). Non-market pressures influence which segments are served. Thus, a major challenge is for government to accomplish a blending of provider, consumer and public interests (Klaus, 1985).

Public agencies must deal with the issue of equity in the allocation and distribution of services. The public's perception of equity is proposed as a contributing element to expectations for recreation service delivery. The public's expectations of recreation service quality may be influenced differentially according to which equity model is in operation. Three alternate models of equity generally recognized are: equal opportunity, compensatory and market (Crompton and Lamb, 1986). The equal opportunity model is the most traditional; it allocates services equally to all citizens, regardless of need. The compensatory model reflects allocation of services to those who are disadvantaged and in the most need of resources. The third model, market equity, refers to the allocation of services on a proportional basis with fees or taxes paid. With this model only those who pay consume. A recreation agency could employ all three equity models in different service situations (Crompton and Lamb, 1986).

All of the above distinctions between public and commercial service agencies lead to delivery considerations not only unique to services, but also unique to the public sector.

A suggested model of perceived recreation service quality

Fig. 2 suggests a model which is intended to explain the process by which a consumer evaluates recreation service quality. The model, adapted from Parasuraman et al. (1985), suggests that recreation service quality consists of five dimensions. Service quality is operationalized as the difference between what is expected from each of the service dimensions and what a consumer perceives he or she receives from them. Highly satisfactory quality occurs when perceived performance exceeds expectations. Satisfactory quality results from when performance meets expectations. Unsatisfactory quality implies that perceptions fall short of expectations.

Expected service, as perceived by the consumer, is determined by non-personal communications, word of mouth, perceived needs, past experience and equity (Fig. 2). Publicity is a major source of non-personal communications in the context of public recreation services. It can be instrumental in forming consumer expectations through its promises and displays.

Word of mouth communication is publicity by consumers for consumers. It has a great deal of credibility among prospective users for this reason. Further strengthening the role of word of mouth is its occurrence among family, friends and reference groups, each of whom the potential user may hold in high regard (Lovelock and Weinberg, 1984).

Perceived needs are the extent of each attribute required to produce satisfaction with service quality. For example, the amount of park security necessary for campers to feel assured of personal safety will vary from person to person (Campbell et al., 1976).

Past experience provides a basis for comparison, and therefore influences the formulation of expectations. The association between previous expectations and what was expected. This could be explained by certain factors, such as what to expect.

Equity, as it may affect expectations, should reflect his or her situative relative to others (Campbell et al., 1985). Equity may imply equal opposition to individual perceptions of what is perceived.

Perceived service may differ from the structuring of cultural factors on structuring (Mercer, 1971). Perceived service received (Greenleaf et al., 1984) characterizes a service (Campbell et al., 1985). Subsequent judgements of satisfaction may vary how consumers perceive the recreation service (Parasuraman et al., 1985; Can

Concluding comments

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should reflect his or her situation if justice prevails, given how much is invested
relative to others (Campbell et al., 1976). For public recreation services the concept
of equity may imply equal opportunity, compensatory or market, depending on
individual perceptions of what is fair in a given situation.

Perceived service may differ from actual service because of the effects of social
and cultural factors on structuring an individual’s physical and social environment
(Mercer, 1971). Perceived service is what a person thinks or feels was the service
received (Greenleaf et al., 1984), and thus does not necessarily reflect the actual
characteristics of a service (Campbell et al., 1976). This is important because the
subsequent judgements of satisfactory, or unsatisfactory, service quality depend on
how consumers perceive the recreation service compared to what they expected
(Parasuraman et al., 1985; Campbell et al., 1976).

Concluding comments
Recreation service quality is receiving more attention from both academic and
managerial perspectives. The prevalent concern is with addressing service quality
from the consumer’s perspective. Managers need to know the components of a
quality recreation experience and their relative importance in order to provide for it
effectively (Becker, 1978). The suggested model of perceived recreation service
quality (Fig. 2) provides a framework for the methodical investigation of perceived
quality in recreation service delivery.
The challenge of providing a high quality recreation service becomes less difficult when agencies know what their patrons expect from a service and what dimensions of it they feel are important. The model demonstrates that these can be identified and readily interpreted, at least in theory. Satisfaction with service quality is expressed by individual evaluation of various attributes or determinants (Campbell et al., 1976). The model provides a guide for pursuing evaluation of recreation service quality through a comparison of expectations and perceptions. The results of this type of comparison indicate to an agency which areas of a recreation service are satisfactory and which need improvement. Quality recreation services can be improved through this process of evaluation and modification.

Agency evaluation of service quality has implications for marketing strategies. It is beneficial for an agency perceived as providing high quality programmes and services to promote this. Individual dimensions of service quality can be performed to reduce perceived risk of participation for potential clientele. Evaluation of service quality is often undertaken as a means of risk reduction (Day and Castleberry, 1986). Risk reduction strategies employed by marketers commonly include attempts to increase certainty that the service will be well performed (Assael, 1984). Promotion of quality aspects may elevate agency image and alleviate hesitancy to participate.

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