

An Empirical Investigation of Service Quality Based on RATER Model

Hui-Lin Hsu, Hung-Chi Hsu^{*}, Daxing Du, Quanhua Hu

School of Business Administration, Baise University, Baise, China

Email address:

2319648751@qq.com (Hui-Lin Hsu), 2220703262@qq.com (Hung-Chi Hsu), 822548960@qq.com (Daxing Du)

^{*}Corresponding author

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Abstract: The sales market of beverages and baked goods is very competitive in China, especially in Shanghai, which has the highest density of convenience stores in the country, and these stores mainly sell beverages and various foods. Therefore, in order to maintain an advantage in a highly competitive market, chain coffee shops should examine the quality of service and ensure that their customers are satisfied. This research takes C company as a case study of service quality, explores the gap between customers' actual service experience and prior expectations, and finds out the existing problems and puts forward improvement suggestions. The research method is based on random distribution of questionnaires as a research tool, and the survey objects are the existing customers of C company. The questionnaire design is based on the five dimensions of the RATER model, combined with the characteristics of the catering industry, and develops evaluation indicators. The survey results show that the respondents have the characteristics of youth, and their satisfaction with service quality is in the order of tangibility, responsiveness, reliability, assurance, and empathy. At the same time, this paper proposes countermeasures, including that companies should provide a friendly service environment and make timely remediation for service failures. The service awareness of service personnel should be transformed from passive to active, professional skills need to be improved, and they must have the ability to think from the perspective of customers.

Keywords: RATER Model, Service Quality, Customer Satisfaction

1. Introduction

In recent years, the customer satisfaction survey of enterprises has become an important topic, especially service industry satisfaction survey has become one of the important methods for enterprises to find problems and improve services. Through satisfaction surveys, enterprises can understand the gap between consumers' expectations and actual consumption experiences. Then, improve the existing problems to meet the expectations of consumers and strengthen loyalty.

Customer satisfaction, also known as customer satisfaction index, is mainly obtained through customer satisfaction surveys, showing the degree of matching between customer expectations and customer experience after service. In other words, it is an indicator obtained by comparing the customer's experience perception with its original expectations.

Customer satisfaction is based on the customer's experience after consuming a product or service. The feeling is objective, but the experience cognition is subjective. The degree of satisfaction is not only depended on the customer's conditions, such as past experience and knowledge, living habits, income and values, but also to other factors, such as media communication and so on. Furthermore, through customer satisfaction research, the limited resources owned by the enterprises can be concentrated on the needs of customers that are most concerned by customers, and at the same time, limited resources can also be preferentially allocated to the most valuable customers, so as to retain them and enhance their loyalty.

Kotler (2003) found that customers will be satisfied or dissatisfied to a certain extent after purchasing products or services. If the customer is satisfied, they will buy the products or service again [1]. Jones & Sasser (1995) believe that after customers are satisfied with consumption,

re-purchasing is just a basic behavior. In addition, other behaviors will be derived, such as word of mouth or public recommendation. The word-of-mouth and public recommendations derived from customer satisfaction are important key factors for the operation of enterprises [2]. Soderlund (1998) confirmed positive correlation among customer satisfaction, repurchase behavior and repurchase quantity through empirical research [3]. Obviously, from the above related research on customer satisfaction and service quality, it can be seen that customer satisfaction is one of the key factors that affect business performance. Today's consumers are no longer just satisfied with basic physiological needs, but require higher quality services. Under the mechanism of market competition, the importance of service marketing factors will exceed the product or price factors. Therefore, if an enterprise wants to survive in a highly competitive market, it should take customer satisfaction as the core of its business philosophy. In the booming era of modern e-commerce, consumers also pay great attention to the quality of service through online consumption. The quality of online services of a company also determines its competitiveness. The online marketing model provides consumers with a huge variety of products and purchase convenience, posing a competitive threat to brick-and-mortar retailers (Gauri et al., 2021) [4]. However, almost all companies, regardless of their size, are influenced by online marketing (Dash & Paul, 2021) [5]. Compared with offline transactions, consumers purchase goods online will rely more on customer satisfaction to decide whether to repurchase (Hult et al., 2019) [6].

This study takes the customers of C company's many branches in Shanghai as the research object. Company C is a chain and compound catering company, mainly operating in first-tier cities in Shanghai. This company entered the Chinese market earlier and gained the advantage of priority access. After more than ten years of expansion, the total number of branches in the United States, Australia and China currently exceeds 1,000. The main product categories are desserts, freshly baked bread, coffee and various beverages and cakes four product lines. The product strategy is mainly to use "coffee + cake or bread" to form a product mix, increase customers' diversified choices, and form a unique competitive advantage. In terms of pricing strategy, the company's business philosophy is to "provide popular products and services and bring customers a high-quality consumption experience." Therefore, product pricing is a low-price strategy that is suitable for everyone to enjoy. In terms of the distribution of sales channels, the combination of online and offline sales channels is adopted. The company adopts a direct operation model to provide standardized products and services. However, due to the differences in the demographic attributes of each region, customers may have different satisfaction with service quality.

This paper takes the customers of many branches of C Company in Shanghai as the object of investigation, and conducts a satisfaction survey on service quality. This research takes the RATER model as the theoretical basis, and

compiles the questionnaire. Through the questionnaire collection and data analysis results, the existing problems are found and the improvement countermeasures are put forward. This research is both empirical and practical, and motivates companies to provide more precise service quality to customers.

2. Literature Review

2.1. Service Quality

The service industry is a very important industry in developed countries. In order to stand out in the highly competitive service industry, enterprises must provide high service quality (Cronin & Taylor, 1992) [7]. Kotler (1997) argues that services are different from general economic activities. Services are different from physical goods in four characteristics: intangible, inseparability, variability and perishability [8]. It is because the service has these four characteristics that it is difficult for consumers to describe the intangible service quality in detail, and can only be described by some adjectives (Crosby, Evans & Cowles, 1990) [9]. Service is the carrier of the brand. Good service will get a good reputation from customers and form a market brand effect. Satisfaction, however, is seen as having a broader meaning than service quality. Satisfaction is influenced by factors such as service quality, product quality, price, emotions and personal characteristics (Zeithaml & Binter, 2000) [10]. Oliver (1981) believes that customer satisfaction is an evaluation of consumers' feelings about the experience of product consumption, which is an immediate response [11].

2.2. Customer Satisfaction

The purpose of enterprise satisfaction research is to obtain the evaluation of consumers' satisfaction with services. Customer satisfaction is not only determined by the service quality of the enterprise itself, but also includes the links that customers come into contact with in the consumption process, such as the services of online sales platforms (Xu, 2021) [12]. Kotler (1997) believes that customer satisfaction is a function of the differences between customer expectations and actual perceptions, and is a psychological cognitive state generated by comparing the two [8]. Parasuraman, Zeithaml and Berry (1985) defined service satisfaction as the cognitive gap between the customer's expected service in advance and the actual service received. If the gap is greater than zero, it means that the customer is satisfied with the service quality; if the gap between the two is less than zero, it means that the customer is not satisfied with the quality of the service [13]. Cronin & Taylor (1992) also proposed to measure service quality by customer's service perception, that is to say, service quality is the perceived state of being served by customers [7].

2.3. Measure of Service Quality

Service quality is an important factor in successfully maintaining customer relationships and creating corporate

value. To be competitive in the market, an enterprise's services should meet three conditions at the same time: determining the gap between perceived service quality and expected service quality, appropriate service design and eliminating possible mistakes in the service process. If consumers perceive the service quality to be excellent, the service quality can continue to be maintained (Altuntas & Kansu, 2019) [14]. The measure of service quality was first proposed by Sasser *et al.* in 1978 (Sasser & Wyckoff, 1978) [15]. Parasuraman *et al.* summarized the factors affecting service quality into ten dimensions, and this model is a conceptual model of service quality, called PZB model (Parasuraman, Zeithaml & Berry 1985) [13]. The PZB model is also known as the SERVQUAL model, and its core theory is based on the service quality gap, that is, the difference between the customer's expectation of service quality and the actual experience obtained from the service. SERVQUAL is also an effective tool for evaluating service quality. After that, Parasuraman *et al.* integrated the above ten dimensions into five in 1988 (Parasuraman, Zeithaml & Berry 1988) [16], namely Tangibles, Reliability, Responsiveness, Assurance and Empathy. The scale has a total of 22 questions. This scale, called the "SERVQUAL" scale, is widely accepted and used in academic and practical fields, but there are also some doubts. Therefore, Parasuraman *et al.* revised the scale again (Parasuraman, Zeithaml & Berry 1991) [17], and the reliability and validity of the revised SERVQUAL scale are better than the original scale.

The RATER model is derived from the SERVQUAL model, which was developed on the basis of practice. The RATER model first appeared in the book "Delivering Quality Service: Balancing Customer Perceptions and Expectations" by Zeithaml, Parasuraman and Berry in 1990 [18]. The RATER model is a refinement of the SERVQUAL model. The SERVQUAL model originally used 10 dimensions to measure service quality, while the RATER model used 5 dimensions. The RATER is an acronym for five dimensions: reliability, assurance, tangible, empathy, and responsiveness, representing five different dimension of service quality. Customer satisfaction with the service directly depends on the level of the RATER index.

3. Construct the RATER Research Model

This study uses the RATER model as the research framework for customer satisfaction. The required data is collected through a questionnaire, and the score of the five dimensions is calculated by a weighted average. Then, by sorting the scores of the five dimensions, we can find the order of customer satisfaction. Based on this, identify the problems existing in service quality, analyze the causes of the problems, and formulate effective service countermeasures.

3.1. Establish the Evaluation Indicators of Service Quality

This survey constructs operational indicators based on the five dimensions of the RATER model. The operational indicators are designed according to the actual situation of

enterprises and through observation and interview. The evaluation indicators of the RATER model in this study are shown in Table 1.

Table 1. Indicators description of five dimensions.

Dimension	Indicator description
Reliability	Reliable, accurate and timely performance of service commitments to customers
Assurance	Service staff have professional knowledge, skills and professional quality
Tangibles	Tangible service facilities and environment, instrumentation of service personnel, and tangible equipment
Empathy	The service staff can put themselves in the customer's shoes and actively understand the customer's needs
Responsiveness	The service staff responds immediately to the needs of customers and can provide services quickly

3.2. Develop Scale and Calculate Indicator Scores

In this study, a questionnaire was developed to collect research data. The content of the questionnaire is divided into two parts. The first part is the demographic attributes of the respondents, including gender, age, monthly income. The second part is the question item of satisfaction, which is designed according to the definition of five indicators and with reference to the actual situation of C Company. The questionnaire uses a 5-point Likert scale, with scores ranging from 5 to 1 according to "very satisfied", "satisfied", "normal", "dissatisfied", and "very dissatisfied". The subjects of the survey are consumers of many branches of Company C, and the sampling method of the questionnaire is to distribute, fill in and collect on site.

In order to ensure the reliability and validity of the evaluation indicators, 110 questionnaires were used for predictive analysis. The predictive survey results show that the Cronbach α coefficients of the five dimensions are all greater than 0.8, and the CITI values of the items are all greater than 0.7, indicating that the questionnaire is reliable. The KMO values of the five dimensions are all greater than 0.7, and the factor loading coefficients of the 19 items of the questionnaire are all greater than 0.9, indicating that the questionnaire is valid.

The Cronbach alpha coefficient of the formal questionnaire corresponds to the five dimensions of tangibility, responsiveness, professionalism, empathy, and reliability, which are 0.867, 0.855, 0.856, 0.843, and 0.813, respectively. The overall alpha coefficient is 0.921. The CITC value of each item is greater than 0.7. It fully shows that the questionnaire is stable enough to support the conclusion of this study.

After the questionnaire is collected, the weighted average is calculated based on the frequency and points of each item, and then the average of each dimension is calculated. The calculation method is as follows:

$$\text{average value} = \frac{\sum_{i=1}^n \text{frequency } i \times \text{point } i}{\text{total sample size}}$$

After the above statistics, by ranking the five-dimensional average, we can know the customer's satisfaction with the service quality.

4. Empirical Survey Results

A total of 300 questionnaires were distributed, 288 were recovered, 271 valid samples were obtained, and the valid sample rate reached 94%. The results of the questionnaire survey are divided into two aspects: the demographic attributes of the respondents and the customer satisfaction. The descriptions are as follows.

4.1. Demographic Attributes of Respondents

The data in Table 2 show that the gender ratio of the respondents is similar. The age of the respondents is mainly concentrated between the age of 25 and 45, accounting for about 91%, which means that the customer group is young. Most of the respondents have a monthly salary of more than 4,000 RMB.

Table 2. Analysis of the demographic attributes of respondents.

Category	Demographic attributes	Numbers	Percentage
Gender	Male	132	48.71%
	Female	139	51.29%
Age	under 25 years old	89	32.84%
	25 (inclusive)-35 years old	97	35.79%
	35 (inclusive)-45 years old	60	22.14%
	over 45 years old	25	9.23%
Monthly Income	2,500-4,000 RMB	56	20.66%
	4,000 (inclusive) -7000 RMB	105	38.75%
	7,000 (inclusive)—10,000 RMB	82	30.26%
	More than 10,000 RMB	28	10.33%

4.2. Customer Satisfaction Analysis of Service Quality

In this study, there are 15 evaluation indicators for the five dimensions of service quality. The frequency statistics of each indicator obtained by the questionnaire survey are shown in Table 3.

According to the frequency in Table 3, the weighted average was calculated as indicator score. Then calculate the average score of each dimension, and arrange the satisfaction order according to the average score. The average of each indicator and dimension ranking are shown in Table 4. The analysis results show that the dimension scores from low to high are empathy, assurance, reliability, responsiveness and tangibles.

Table 3. Frequency of evaluation indicators.

Dimensions	Evaluation indicators	Very dissatisfied	Dissatisfied	Normal	Satisfied	Very satisfied
Reliability	1	33	32	71	70	65
	2	27	37	74	73	60
	3	30	35	87	67	52
	4	28	48	82	69	42
Assurance	5	29	36	82	71	53
	6	39	37	105	64	31
	7	4	8	55	101	103
Tangibles	8	5	9	51	111	95
	9	9	15	78	90	79
	10	36	50	95	53	37
Empathy	11	33	61	113	39	25
	12	30	49	90	71	31
	13	16	22	70	93	73
Responsiveness	14	13	34	76	64	84
	15	20	31	80	76	64

4.3. Problems and Countermeasures in Service Quality

Based on the above investigation and analysis, it is found that there are some problems of the service quality in Company C. The corresponding countermeasures are given below.

4.3.1. Analysis and Countermeasures of Tangibility

The external image of the service place, such as the environment and facilities, can make customers have a direct experience perception, which is the tangible manifestation. From the survey information, it can be seen that the respondents are the most satisfied with the company's tangibility, which ranks the first in the five dimensions. This means that the chain enterprise has certain norms in the overall environment and equipment establishment, including uniforms for service personnel, so that consumers are most satisfied with the tangibles. Analyzing the survey samples, it was found that more than 93% of the respondents were satisfied with the three evaluation indicators of tangibility, but about 10% of the respondents believed that the physical facilities did not fully meet the expectations of consumers. Therefore, Company C still needs to provide a friendly service environment more precisely.

4.3.2. Analysis and Countermeasures of Responsiveness

The dimension of responsiveness is reflected in the degree of feedback, the effectiveness of information communication, and the timeliness of response by service personnel when facing customer needs. At the same time, this dimension is also a key evaluation indicator of customer service quality for the catering service industry. Table 4 shows that responsiveness ranks second among the five dimensions. More than 87%, 83% and 81% of the respondents are satisfied with the three evaluation indicators of responsiveness respectively. This means that service personnel can respond to consumers' needs in a timely and efficient manner, and then solve problems for them. However, it should be noted that the responsiveness dimension represents the fact that service personnel passively give feedback after consumers actively express their needs or problems, rather than actively discovering consumers' needs and problems.

Table 4. Average scores and dimension ranking.

Dimension	Evaluation indicators	Indicator score	Dimension average	Rank
Reliability	1. The promises made by the service staff are fulfilled on time	3.376	3.344	3
	2. When consumers are confused, service staff can show concern and help	3.376		
	3. Consumers feel reassured when conducting spending activities	3.280		
Assurance	4. Service staff with extensive beverage and baking expertise	3.159	3.187	4
	5. Service staff have professional quality and service consciousness	3.306		
Tangibles	6. Service staff with professional skills and communication and collaboration skills	3.096	3.969	1
	7. The store is clean and comfortable	4.074		
	8. Service staff dress appropriately	4.041		
Empathy	9. The facilities provided meet the needs of consumers	3.793	2.989	5
	10. Service staff can take the initiative to understand the needs of consumers and provide personalized services	3.018		
	11. Service staff prioritizes consumer interests	2.860		
Responsiveness	12. Service time to meet the needs of consumers	3.089	3.614	2
	13. Information communication channels are smooth	3.716		
	14. The services provided are timely	3.635		
	15. Consumer problems can be solved efficiently and quickly	3.491		

Enterprises can improve the satisfaction of responsiveness through the incentive system. Combine the responsiveness of service personnel to consumers with performance, and make appropriate rewards or punishments. In particular, the incentive effect of rewards will enable service personnel to actively improve their service awareness, that is to say, to convert passive work into active willingness, thereby improving the service quality of the enterprise in terms of responsiveness.

4.3.3. Analysis and Countermeasures of Assurance

The assurance is reflected in the professional knowledge and skills of service personnel. For the catering industry, it is necessary not only to have sufficient professional catering knowledge, but also to have high-quality services. In this survey, it is found that the ranking of assurance fell behind in fourth, and only 74% of the respondents are satisfied with the assurance. This result shows that there are still some problems in the assurance dimension. The survey results in Table 4 show that the respondents are not satisfied with the dimension of assurance, and only gave the weighted average scores of 3.16, 3.30 and 3.10 for the three evaluation indicators respectively.

In order to improve the professional service quality, first of all, the enterprise should formulate the professional conditions for the selection of service personnel, raise the admission threshold and recruit high-quality personnel; Furthermore, it is necessary to formulate professional skills training plans for on-the-job service personnel, such as educating service personnel to understand the nutritional content and calories of food, so as to assist customers to achieve health management in consumption; In addition, food safety and hygiene are also important expertise in the catering industry. Through the management of food safety, giving consumers a safe consumption process will not only help to improve the dimension of assurance, but also improve consumers' satisfaction with tangibility and reliability.

4.3.4. Analysis and Countermeasures of Empathy

Empathy is different from responsiveness. Responsiveness represents that the service staff passively responds to and

solves the needs of consumers, while the degree of empathy means that the service staff actively understands the needs of consumers, which is a spontaneous behavior. The survey results in Table 4 show that the average of the empathy dimension is the lowest among all dimensions, which means that its service quality satisfaction is the worst. Only 68% of consumers are satisfied that service personnel can effectively understand the needs of consumers and provide personalized services. 65% of consumers believe that service personnel will prioritize consumer interests. Obviously, in this survey, it was found that the respondents were satisfied with the passive and effective response of the service staff to the needs of consumers, but they lacked active understanding of the needs of consumers. Service personnel provide services to consumers according to the procedures established by the company. Although they conform to standard operating procedures, they cannot actively provide services corresponding to the habits and preferences of different consumers. Service personnel do not take the initiative to empathize, which will make customers feel uncomfortable, thereby reducing the service quality perceived by consumers.

In order to increase the empathy of service personnel and improve their service awareness, companies need to make some action plans. For example, during performance appraisal, service personnel must write a work report to find out their shortcomings and problems encountered, so as to achieve the purpose of self-reflection and gradually develop the ability of empathy.

4.3.5. Analysis and Countermeasures of Reliability

Reliability is a very important dimension for a chain enterprise, and it affects not just one branch, but the operation of the whole enterprise. Reliability enables customers to recognize the corporate brand, which can help increase brand awareness and establish a positive word of mouth, thereby turning satisfied consumers into loyal consumers, and bringing new consumers through old customers. As a result, companies maintain an advantage in a competitive market. Table 4 shows that the reliability dimension ranks third, with a weighted score of 3.34. The 76%

of respondents are satisfied with the service commitment provided by service personnel. However, there are still some respondents who believe that service personnel do not fulfill their promises in a timely manner, which will cause customers to be dissatisfied with the consumption experience. The possible reason for this dissatisfaction is that the service personnel are not familiar enough with the content of the company's service commitments, so they can not accurately provide services to customers and fulfill their commitments to consumers in a timely manner. Therefore, this study suggests that in order to improve consumers' reliability in service quality, the supervision and management system must be improved. First of all, for chain enterprises, the headquarters needs to send supervisors to regularly check whether the service personnel of each store are familiar with the content of service commitments. Secondly, the branch managers should supervise and educate the service personnel in a timely manner during the work period, so as to avoid the service personnel not being able to fulfill their commitments to the customers in time. Third, after the customer consumes, if there is dissatisfaction or complaint, it must be remedied in time to regain the confidence of the customers.

5. Conclusion

The results of this survey found that the respondents' satisfaction with the five dimensions was tangibility, responsiveness, reliability, assurance, and empathy in order. The weighted scores of the dimensions are 3.969, 3.614, 3.344, 3.187, and 2.989 respectively, of which the satisfaction score of tangible facilities is the highest, while the weighted score of empathy is the lowest, indicating that the empathy of service personnel for consumers needs to be improved urgently.

This study proposes countermeasures for the existing problems. In terms of hardware, it is necessary to optimize service equipment and improve the store environment; in terms of service personnel, it is necessary to raise the entry threshold and carry out relevant training to improve service ability and professional quality; In terms of service awareness, enterprises should focus on improving the service awareness of service personnel and improving the personnel assessment system.

Enterprises need to constantly measure whether the services they provide meet the needs of customers through the five dimensions of service quality. When the services exceed the expectations of customers, enterprises can obtain lasting competitive advantages.

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