

The Dimensions of E-Service Quality



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INTRODUCTION

As the era of e-business continues to mature, more and more organizations rely on the Internet to support communication and transactions with constituents. For many organizations, a Web site is a primary way in which the organization's customers or constituents interact with the organization. Given the important role of such Web sites, it is critical for organizations to provide high quality electronic services and delivery via a Web site. High quality electronic services can promote customer satisfaction and loyalty, while poor services may result in dissatisfied and lost customers (Parasuraman, Zeithaml, & Malhotra, 2005).

One of the critical questions for investigators of e-service quality has been the identification of the different dimensions of e-service quality and their relative importance in affecting customer satisfaction and future behavior. Over the past several years, researchers have specified e-service dimensions for an increasingly wide range of e-businesses. This article provides a review of the existing research concerning the dimensions of electronic service quality. The authors summarize recent developments in the measurement of e-service quality and suggest directions for future research.

BACKGROUND

Much of the work regarding electronic service quality is directly or indirectly grounded in earlier research regarding traditional, or non-electronic, service quality. As summarized by Parasuraman, Zeithaml, and Berry (1985), service quality differs significantly from physical goods quality due to the intangible, heterogeneous, and inseparable nature of services. This led Parasuraman et al. (1985) to conclude that service quality was more difficult for consumers to evaluate than goods quality; that consumer quality assessment depends on a comparison of prior expectations with perceived service performance; and that the process of service delivery as well as the outcome of the service were both vital in the customer's evaluation of quality.

Assessing the Quality of Traditional Services with SERVQUAL and SERVPERF

Parasuraman, Zeithaml, and Berry (1988) subsequently developed SERVQUAL, a service quality model and assessment tool designed to incorporate these differences. SERVQUAL assessed service quality along five dimensions via a forty-four question customer survey. A key element of the original SERVQUAL was the "gap model" of service quality, defining service quality as the difference between a customer's expectations of service and her actual service experience. The five service quality dimensions the authors

derived were service tangibles (e.g., the appearance of the service facility), reliability, responsiveness, assurance, and empathy.

As an alternative to SERVQUAL, Cronin and Taylor (1992) introduced SERVPERF, which directly measured the service quality perceived by the customer in lieu of assessing the gap between expectation and experience. The survey items used in the SERVPERF model are largely based on the survey items in SERVQUAL.

SERVQUAL and SERVPERF have each been well-used measures of traditional service quality (Carrillat, Jaramillo, & Mulki, 2007). Virtually all assessment tools for e-service quality have adopted the direct measurement approach of SERVPERF rather than the gap theory approach of SERVQUAL.

The E-Business Universe

Before examining current models of e-service quality, it is important to recognize the wide range of e-businesses in existence. The importance of the distinctions across the e-business spectrum was recognized by Belanger et al. (2006), who developed a Web site taxonomy based on the goals of eleven different types of Web sites. This taxonomy is reproduced in the second and third columns of Table 1, while the first column organizes the taxonomy into five general categories.

As can be seen in Table 1, the well-known concept of “e-commerce” is just one of eleven distinct Web site types identified by Belanger et al. (2006). Specifically, e-commerce is a type of transaction processing Web site. The other types of transaction processing sites – interactive service management sites and online application sites – do not necessarily have similar goals and quality dimensions as an e-commerce site. Differences might also be expected for the e-business applications listed in Table 1 with a focus other than transaction processing: decision support, knowledge acquisition, online community, and entertainment Web sites. All of these e-business categories differ from e-commerce in that

Table 1. Web site taxonomy (based on Belanger et al., 2006)

General Web Site Focus	Belanger et al. Web Site Goal	Definition
Transaction processing	E-commerce	Allow online transactions with others (suppliers, partner, customer, government)
	Interactive service management	Allow individuals or organizations to service accounts online
	Online application	Allow individuals or organizations access to applications on Web-based platforms
Decision support	Informed decision-biased	Give product information with goal of influencing user decisions
	Informed decision-unbiased	Help users make an informed decision but without bias toward a particular decision
Knowledge acquisition	Life enrichment	Increase general awareness of a topic, but not necessarily a product
	Online learning	Offer forums for educational purposes
	Knowledge enhancement	Inform visitors on current events or specific topics quickly
	Information specific search	Provide ability to search and find relevant information on particular topics
Online community	Online community	Gather and share information on certain topics and act as forums for people with similar interests
Entertainment	Entertainment	Offer entertainment

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