

A STUDY OF CONSUMER PERCEPTION OF THE SERVICE/PRODUCER UNITY CONCEPT

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Abstract

This paper considers consumer behavior relative to the service characteristics of inseparability between the services and its producer.

Indeed, the non-mechanized service and its producer are one, because of the creative content of many, if not all, types of personal services. One may expect the consumer to survey alternative sources of services, carefully considering the ability of the source's service producers because of the creative content of the service.

The setting for this study utilized 166 graduate and undergraduate business students in attendance at the first summer session of 1980 at St. John's University, an urban institution. All students commute to school; there are no dormitory facilities. Furthermore, most graduate students are employed full-time, and attend only evening classes.

The operational procedure involved the distribution of a simple questionnaire of three questions. The intent of the questions was to find how much the consumers believed that service producers contributed to consumer satisfaction; how the consumers employed this attitude; and whether the consumers' perceptions of the role of the service producer changed over time. Accordingly, a before-and-after framework was attempted through the wording of the questions. Comparing the differences between the preference ratings given to each answer choice within the time framework measures the influence of time and experience on consumer perceptions.

The hypotheses tested were:

1. Faculty skill or reputation is the most important factor assumed by a consumer of an educational service to provide the overall satisfaction he seeks, when planning such a purchase.
2. Faculty skill or reputation is the most important determinant of student satisfaction while in attendance at the educational institution.
3. Experienced consumers of an educational service value the skill of the service producers more highly than do the less experienced consumers.

A. Before

Both groups of respondents expected the program of courses offered to provide the greatest satisfaction sought. However, 77% of the experienced consumers ranked the program most highly compared to only 58% of the less experienced.

Of the less experienced consumers, almost as many (54%) ranked accreditation most highly as an anticipated satisfaction factor. This is an important point as accreditation appears to be an objective information factor from a source beyond the control of the service marketer. An objective symbol of all things intangible about the education service, i.e., the promise of satisfaction, faculty reputation and skill, surrogates such as this should be expected to be a valuable decision influence on the inexperienced consumer. A recommendation from an objective source, it guides the choice of the inexperienced. However, the graduate students also consid-

ered accreditation important, although in third place after convenient location.

Convenient location received high rankings by both groups, as might be expected among a commuting student body. While ranked a distant second among graduate students, its third place rating among undergraduates (49%) was higher than the graduate rating of 47%. Clearly, inexperienced consumers have a different scale of values than the experienced.

Few of each group expected that the satisfaction sought would be provided by the service producers. With the average of the "most" ratings at 35%, faculty ratings were about 25% below average.

B. After

It appears that Hypothesis 2 is proven negatively. The program of courses is perceived by both groups as still contributing most to consumer satisfaction, but there are interesting changes in the second and third place choices.

Accreditation's importance declined by 30% among the undergraduates, and increased slightly among the graduate students. The former change can be explained as reflecting the changed situation of the respondents, from prospective purchasers to active consumers. Therefore, the relevance of this aid to his confidence need is diminished.

The importance of the service producers continues to be low rated, in the "after" portion of the study. But this appearance is belied by the magnitude of the percent change in the before-and-after ratings assigned to faculty reputation and faculty skill. An Exhibit shows that the more experienced consumers (graduate students) increased their awareness of the importance of producer skills by 71%. The less experienced undergraduates raised their assessment of the importance of faculty skill by 24%, and of faculty reputation by 17%. The magnitude of these changes is impressive.

Conclusion

The major conclusion to be drawn is that very few consumers of an educational service perceive, or are influenced by, the unity that exists between the service and its producers, regardless of their prior experience. However, while consumers are in the act of consuming the service, the recognition grows of the importance of the service performers' skill as a major factor in producing the satisfaction that the consumer seeks.