

Measuring business-to-business professional service quality and its consequences

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Abstract

Previous studies of service quality have typically been based on the theoretical frameworks associated with the Nordic and the American schools of thought. However, research in both traditions tends to examine service quality issues from a consumer service perspective, with little or no reference to business-to-business services. This study synthesizes the two schools with a European framework for understanding business-to-business marketing, known as the International/Industrial Marketing and Purchasing Group (IMP) perspective. As a result, business-to-business professional service quality is represented by six types of interaction. Empirical data from professional service firms in Hong Kong support this six-dimensional model. Our study contributes to the growing service quality research literature by offering an approach to measurement that comprehensively taps the exchange and interaction dimensions of business-to-business professional service quality. The paper concludes by identifying managerial uses of the approach as well as directions for future research.

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1. Introduction

Since its development in the early 1980s, service quality research has been dominated by studies conducted in the context of consumer services (e.g., Brady and Cronin, 2001; Parasuraman et al., 1988). Only a limited number of studies have addressed business-to-business services (e.g., Bienstock et al., 1997), and even fewer have considered business-to-business professional services (Ullrich, 2002). In the existing body of research, the dimensions on which service quality is measured are typically derived from the SERVQUAL scale or one of its variants. Although it has been extensively used, many authors (e.g., Carman, 1990) have suggested that SERVQUAL's five dimensions (i.e.,

assurance, reliability, responsiveness, tangibility, and empathy) may be so generic as to limit its utility in certain service contexts. Of particular significance is the extent to which a scale that has been developed and applied primarily in a business-to-consumer context can be transferred to a business-to-business context (Parasuraman, 1998). This problem may be particularly acute in the case of a business-to-business professional service, which is advisory in nature and involves a high degree of interaction between representatives of transacting parties (Gummesson, 1978).

At issue, as Parasuraman (1998) notes, is specification of the dimensions that business customers use to evaluate service quality. The 'Nordic School' of services research (Grönroos, 1984) emphasizes the interactive nature of services and suggests that service quality should be conceptualized around both process/functional dimensions (how the service is delivered) and outcome/technical dimensions (what is delivered). The functional–technical

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dichotomy is also in evidence within the North American school of research on service quality and most specifically in the conceptualization of service quality by Parasuraman et al. (1985). The subsequent development of SERVQUAL as a measurement scale showed particular strength in the representation of functional quality. However, both Mangold and Babakus (1991) and Richard and Allaway (1993) have suggested that it neglects technical quality. Others would suggest that although SERVQUAL does accommodate technical quality, its measurement is split between the reliability and assurance dimensions and thus difficult to identify (Buttle, 1996).

In order to address the issue of how best to conceptualize the dimensions of service quality in a business-to-business professional service context, we propose to reexamine the interactions and relationships on which perceptions of service quality are based. For this purpose, we adopt the International/Industrial Marketing and Purchasing Group (IMP) interaction model (e.g., Ford, 1997; Håkansson and Snehota, 2000). This model identifies four dimensions of exchange (i.e., product/service exchange, financial exchange, information exchange, and social exchange) in a relationship and two longer term aspects of that relationship (i.e., institutionalization/cooperation and adaptation).

The use of the IMP model to investigate business-to-business professional service quality in the current study is justified on two grounds. First, the model was derived from extensive empirical work across a range of industry sectors, drawing on case studies for theory building (Håkansson and Snehota, 2000). This empirical work was subsequently developed into a clearly articulated body of theory, which has then been applied across a variety of contexts (e.g., Ford, 1997; Metcalf et al., 1992). The main thrust of the IMP research is on buyer–seller interaction with the relationship as the unit of analysis. It is proposed that the four dimensions of exchange and the two longer term aspects of the relationship (six interaction dimensions in total) mentioned earlier should represent robust indicators of perceived service quality. Second, in addition to a well-grounded theoretical framework, the IMP work has relevance across a range of sectors. Although the original research was related to industrial markets and the buying and selling of manufactured products, its application had been extended to the study of consumer services (e.g., banking services by Proença and Castro, 1998) and business-to-business professional services (e.g., Halinen, 1997).

The paper begins by exploring the features of the IMP framework in more detail and explaining the links between the six interaction dimensions and more established perspectives on service quality. The next section discusses the research design used to substantiate this approach to the conceptualization of business-to-business professional service quality. The subsequent section contains the results of the empirical analysis and the paper concludes with a discussion of implications and directions for future research.

2. Service quality: an IMP interaction perspective

Some of the earliest work on conceptualizing service quality can be traced back to Grönroos' (1984) technical–functional service quality framework. He argued that service quality can be divided into two generic dimensions: technical quality (what is provided) and functional quality (how the service is provided), with image quality (the organization's reputation for quality) mediating the impact of these two dimensions on overall perceived quality. Subsequently, Grönroos (1990) identified six specific dimensions on which service quality could be measured (professionalism and skills, reliability and trustworthiness, attitudes and behavior, accessibility and flexibility, recovery, and reputation and credibility). However, these dimensions have not been subject to any rigorous empirical testing, although a number of studies have used scales based on such principles (e.g., Lehtinen and Lehtinen, 1991). In the mid-1980s, North American researchers also made progress in modeling service quality. Parasuraman et al. (1985), in their exploratory study, developed the “gap” model and 10 dimensions of service quality. These dimensions were subsequently tested using their SERVQUAL scale and were refined to five (Parasuraman et al., 1991). Although SERVQUAL has been extensively criticized on both theoretical and operational grounds (e.g., Buttle, 1996), it remains the dominant framework for studies of service quality and continues to be widely applied (e.g., Trocchia and Swinder, 2003).

The Nordic and the North American approaches to conceptualizing the dimensions of service quality clearly overlap and Brady and Cronin (2001) have recently demonstrated the benefits from attempting to integrate the two perspectives in a business-to-consumer context. Neither of these two perspectives have easily transferred to a business-to-business context because of concern over the generalizability of retail buyers' evaluative criteria as dimensions for the measurement of service quality delivered to business consumers.

As far as the nature of professional service is concerned, Lapierre and Filiatrault (1996) found that two dimensions in the SERVQUAL scale are problematic. The first issue relates to competence. In a professional service context, professionalism is the core of what is being delivered and the competence dimension in the original SERVQUAL scale (Parasuraman et al., 1988) corresponded to Grönroos' (1984, 1990) technical quality dimension (i.e., professionalism and skills). Competence was later subsumed under the assurance dimension in the refined SERVQUAL scale (Parasuraman et al., 1991), with the result that in a professional service context, assurance may confound both functional and technical elements. For example, a high degree of professionalism could lead to excellent technical quality but still be accompanied by poor functional quality. This distinction could be obscured if measurement is based on the existing SERVQUAL format.

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