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Securing customer satisfaction through component service specifications Purchasing maintenance services for social rented housing

Henk-Jan van Mossel^{a,*}, Wendy van der Valk^b^a OTB Research Institute for Housing, Urban and Mobility Studies, Delft University of Technology, Jaffalaan 9, 2628 BX Delft, The Netherlands^b Department of Organisation Science and Marketing, Eindhoven University of Technology, P.O. Box 513, 5600 MB Eindhoven, The Netherlands

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ABSTRACT

Many companies nowadays buy services that they pass on to their customers. A specific example is a housing association that buys maintenance services to be delivered to their tenants. These services are referred to as component services and have a large impact on end customers, and this should be taken into account when developing the specifications for the service.

The main objectives of this article are to (1) find out what end customers perceive as important for their customer satisfaction for component services; and (2) investigate whether the buying company gives sufficient attention to these characteristics in their service specifications. We investigate these issues in the context of maintenance services bought by Dutch housing associations and conduct a survey among tenants to determine the relative importance of different characteristics of the maintenance they receive on their dwellings. Subsequently, we investigate service specification documents to verify whether they sufficiently reflect the characteristics that are important for tenants.

The survey results show that determinants of maintenance service quality that add to perceived tenant control are more important in case of reactive maintenance than in case of planned maintenance. Based on our analyses, we conclude that the selected housing associations only to a limited degree take these aspects into account in the specifications of maintenance services. Although replication in other settings is required, the results of this study suggest that buying companies are not always aware of the specific characteristics of component services, and how this affects the purchasing process.

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1. Introduction

The purchase of business services has become a substantial element of firms' total acquisition of external resources (Axelsson and Wynstra, 2002; Ellram et al., 2004, 2007). Whereas the purchase of business services traditionally revolved around non-product-related services, companies nowadays are increasingly buying services that become part of their offering to their customers. Think of airport luggage handling outsourced by an airline or subcontracted field maintenance for a producer of petrol pumps. We adopt the terminology of Axelsson and Wynstra (2002, p. 105) and Wynstra et al. (2006), who refer to these services as component services.

The services management and marketing literature has largely been lacking a discussion of services that are used in the buying

company's customer processes and in effect become part of the buying company's offerings to customers (Brown, 2002; Jackson and Cooper, 1988; Parasuraman, 1998). Nevertheless, Parasuraman (1998, p. 310) argues that customer–seller links differ for services used internally and services that will be sold to the next level of customers in the supply chain—either with or without being modified. In such supply chains, the quality of service provision strongly influences end-customer satisfaction, which emphasizes the need for properly mapping customer requirements (Wynstra et al. 2006; Ahlstrom and Nordin, 2006). Chandon et al. (1997) and Lewis and Entwistle (1990) argue that such service encounters must carefully be governed since they have a high impact on customer satisfaction. Hence, we argue that for component services, end-customer requirements and their implications for service delivery should be taken into account when buying these services.

Limited attention has however been given to how companies that buy services for their customers deal with specific customer requirements, i.e. whether and how these requirements affect their service specifications. The determinants of service quality in

* Corresponding author. Tel.: +31 15 278 31 01; fax: +31 15 278 34 50.

E-mail addresses: h.j.vanmossel@tudelft.nl (H.-J. van Mossel), w.v.d.valk@tue.nl (W. van der Valk).

the case of services passed on to end customers do not only comprise aspects related to the buying organization, but certainly, or perhaps even more importantly, also to the end customer and their interactions with the buying company.

This paper therefore focuses on how buying companies should specify component services. The main objectives are to find out what determinants of service quality are important for the buying company's customers and to what extent the buying company takes these requirements into account in the specification for these services. We thus look from the buying company's perspective at what their customers deem important and to what extent the buying company transfers this information to their suppliers.

The paper is organized as follows. First, we draw on a usage-based classification of business services (Wynstra et al., 2006) to further pinpoint what kind of services we are discussing. Then, we draw on literature in the area of service supply chains, service quality and specifications to conceptualize how component services can be purchased in a way that contributes to customer satisfaction. After explaining our research design, we present the results of a survey aimed at measuring the relative importance of various determinants of service quality in the context of maintenance services purchased by Dutch housing associations. Subsequently, the results of document studies are discussed to answer the question as to what extent the relevant determinants of service quality are included in maintenance service specifications. The paper ends with conclusions and discussion, managerial implications, limitations and areas for further research.

2. The notion of component services and service supply chains

Companies are increasingly buying services for inclusion in their offerings to end customers. At the same time, research on buying business services has traditionally focused on relatively standardized 'support services', like facility services or IT. Increasingly, professional services like marketing and consultancy, which generally rely to a large extent on expert knowledge of the service provider (Axelsson and Wynstra, 2002), have become subject of research. However, the services studied are mainly targeted at the buying company. Little attention has been paid to services that are targeted at the customer of the customer.

With regard to industrial goods, various authors have pointed out that these are goods that are included in the buying firm's market offering (Hutt and Speh, 1985; Kotler, 1984). In *consumer* services, the distinction between services that are performed in front of customers or away from customers is quite common (e.g. front-office versus back-office services (Chase, 1981; Chase and Tansik, 1983)). The issue at stake is, however, *business* services. These services are passed on directly to the buying company's customer (industrial customers or consumers). This group of services has received little attention in existing business service classifications.

Furthermore, most of these classifications focus on the characteristics of the *provider*, rather than the characteristics of the *buyer* (Cunningham et al., 1997; Mills and Margulies, 1980; West, 1997). As an exception, Jackson and Cooper (1988) looked at business services from a buyer's perspective. They were among the first to acknowledge this category of services and proposed a classification of products and services that takes into account those products and services that are being passed on to the buying company's customers. They referred to this category of services as 'production services', i.e. services that become part of the production process for a particular (set of) product(s) (which, thus, generally constitute direct costs). Building on this classifica-

tion and existing classifications of industrial goods (Hutt and Speh, 1985; Kotler, 1984; Håkansson, 1982), Wynstra et al. (2006) propose a classification of business services based on how the buying company uses the service with respect to its own offerings. According to these authors, this usage-dimension is one of the main drivers for effective ongoing interaction between buyer, seller and end customer. 'Ongoing' here refers to the period of continuous service exchange after the contract has been signed.

Wynstra et al. (2006) identify four service types. Two of these service types are used by the buying firm,¹ the other two are targeted at customers of the buying firm. The latter two types of services concern the following.

- (1) Semi-manufactured services are used as an input into the buying company's offering to end customers. An example is the overnight cleaning of trains purchased by a railway service, resulting in clean trains for the passengers.
- (2) Component services are passed on to the end customer unaltered. An example is the cleaning of train stations as purchased by a railway service. The cleaning services become directly a part of the railway's service offering to passengers.

In a recent series of iterative field studies aimed at investigating the ongoing interaction between component services, it was found that the four service types set different requirements on the way in which these services are purchased (Van der Valk, 2008, 2007).² For example, when buying component services, it is important to take end-customer requirements into account. Knowledge about these requirements is most likely to come from the marketing/sales function. Thus, when buying component services, it seems a good idea to involve marketing in the purchase team that draws up the specifications. Critical buyer capabilities are to identify and communicate customer requirements, whereas an important supplier capability is to understand these requirements, adapt its service delivery to the individual needs of each customer (flexibility), as well as delivery reliability. Similarly, Congram and Epelman (1995) indicate that if service managers and employees are to be effective in anticipating or meeting customers' needs, they must understand the processes comprising their service. For component services, this includes understanding the provider's service processes and how these fit/interact with that of the buying company.

This notion of component services facilitates a discussion of service supply chains. Ellram et al. (2004) noted that little research has been conducted in the area of service supply chains. At the same time, the increased importance of services (see, e.g. Oliva and Kallenberg, 2003; Vargo and Lusch, 2004) and the associated service supply relationships (see, e.g. Åhlstrom and Nordin, 2006; Blumberg, 2003; O'Farrell and Wood, 1999; Trent and Monczka, 1998) justify further investigation of service supply chains. Appropriate management of component services is highly important, since low performance on the side of the supplier will immediately affect end-customer satisfaction and ultimately buying company performance. In their study of service supply relationships, Åhlstrom and Nordin (2006) furthermore signify that using suppliers that enter between a manufacturing company

¹ The two service types are instrumental services and consumption services. Instrumental services are used to change the way the buying company conducts its primary process (think, for example, of management consultancy use to professionalize the purchasing function), whereas consumption services generally become part of the buying company's support processes (think of traditional facility services like office cleaning and catering).

² The studies by Van der Valk (2008, 2007) build on the initial theoretical framework by Wynstra et al. (2006).

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