



Minding the gap: Applying a service marketing model into government policy communications

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ABSTRACT

In order to bolster the emerging but still underdeveloped conceptualization of public communication over potential policies, we apply a framework primarily used in business service marketing to improve service quality ("gap analysis"). We argue that this model has strong heuristic qualities that can alert practitioners who are interested in improving communication regarding potential policies. While we recognize problems implementing the model, we suggest some ways that both practitioners and the public ameliorate the identified issues. Seeing communication about potential policies as a crucial part of the political process, we argue that such efforts have democratic merit.

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1. Introduction

This article deals with a specific kind of policy communication – communication about potential policy – which can be defined as a policy considered or adopted by, for example, a government, but that has not yet been adopted by a higher body such as the parliament.¹ The discussion of communication prior to policy adoption connects to a vast compendium of public policy process literature (e.g., Parsons, 1995; Weimer & Vining, 1999), in which two main visions on policies can be distinguished: the analytical vision (Hoogerwerf & Herweijer, 2003) and the political vision (Lindblom & Woodhouse, 1993; Kingdon, 1995). According to the analytical vision, a policy process can be seen as a cycle of subsequent phases in which problems are solved (agenda setting, policy formulation, policy adoption, policy implementation, policy evaluation). According to the political vision, policies are continuously formulated and are subject to continuous discussion. We will demonstrate that communication issues pervade both the analytical and political views of policy formulation.²

Public communication about potential policies is important for a variety of reasons. For instance, an empirical study published by Kleinnijenhuis and van Hoof (2006) showed that public satisfaction

with the government is increased more by the communication of ambitions (potential policies) than by the communication of results (implemented policies). In another empirical study, Kampen, van de Walle, Maddens, and Bouckaert (2005) concluded that a "lack of transparency" (secrecy, falsification, spin, etc.) is a major impetus for citizens' criticism of government. Furthermore, misperceptions by government and citizens lead to confusion between potential policies, real policies, and faulty implementation as demonstrated by several surveys (i.e., Gelders, 2005a,b). According to Thijs (2004), citizens expect more and more from government and they are inclined to compare the service delivery in the public and private sector. Ringeling (1993) claims that the negative image of government has more to do with the manner by which citizens evaluate the government than by the government's actual public performance. According to Ringeling, when evaluating governments, citizens tend to focus too much on negative aspects and have high expectations, which do not take into account the peculiar challenges governments face. National governments also find themselves in a new situation where other actors – e.g., the media, multinationals, and public actors at supranational/local levels – have increased their power. Bovens, Derksen, Witteveen, Becker, and Kalma (1995) called this phenomenon the "move of politics." As policies cannot always be delivered and some problems are inadequately solved (due to a variety of reasons: lack of autonomy, conflicts of competence, supranational interferences, rules, and practical burdens), politicians will typically focus on their good intentions (Buurma, 2001; Huyse, 2003). While some research indicates that journalists look favorably upon communication about potential policies (Gelders, De Cock, Neijens & Roe, 2007), the practice may also draw criticism concerning politicians' attempt to "spin" the issues (Downes, 1998; Esser, Reinemann, & Fan, 2000; Palmer, 2000). While acknowledging that government public

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¹ Our research is conducted in the West European context with parliamentary governments in which the Executives are composed of teams of Prime Ministers and ministers that emanate from Parliament.

² This sheds light on two complicating aspects regarding the relationship between the "policy adoption" and "policy implementation" (van de Graaf & Hoppe, 1996): (a) policy can formally be adopted but in practice it may be necessary to specify several aspects of these policies, or (b) it may be the case that policies are not yet formally decided but some parts of the policy are being implemented.

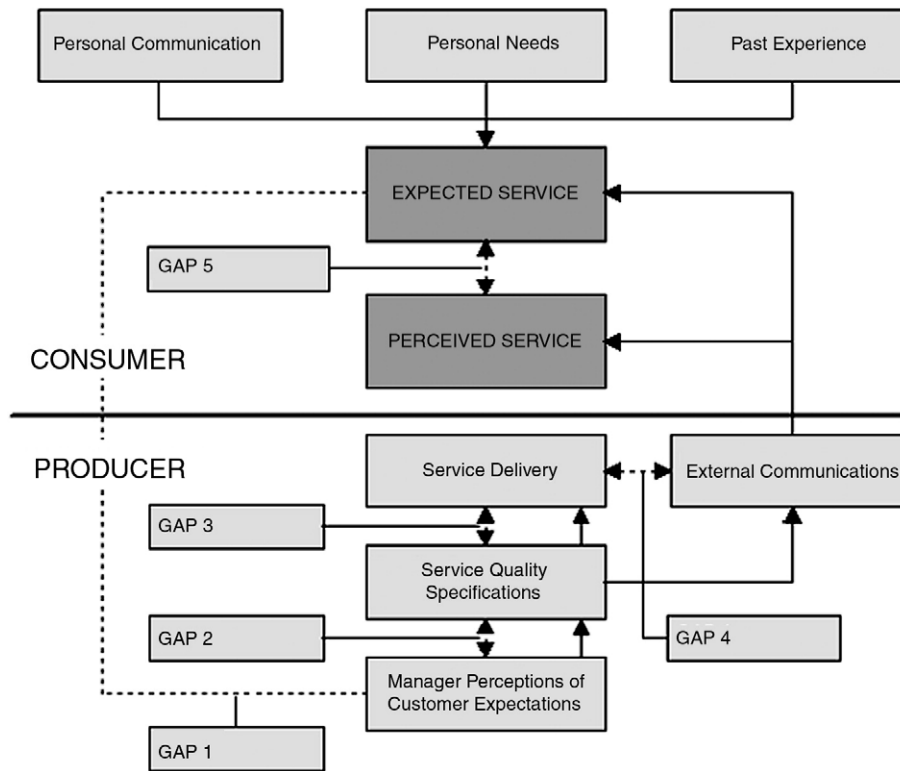


Fig. 1. Gap analysis model by Zeithaml, Parasuraman, and Berry (1990).

relations also has a “dark” side, we will suggest a model for ethical communication about potential policies.

Many scholars have pointed out that there is relatively little research on public sector communication (e.g., Graber, 2002; Lee, 2007; Liu & Horsley, 2007). Most scholars seem to agree that experiences from the private sector can be applicable to the public sector if scholars and practitioners pay attention to some of the specific peculiarities of the latter (Falcione & Adrian, 1997; Gelders, Bouckaert & van Ruler, 2007). Gelders et al. (2007) point to four characteristics of the public sector that distinguishes it from the private sector: a more complicated, unstable environment; additional legal and formal constraints; more rigid procedures; and more diverse products and objectives. While keeping these differences in mind, we will apply a business service model that is intended to increase customers' service satisfaction to public sector communication. While using the word “customer” in the public context, we are aware that there is debate on this issue in public administration literature (e.g., Osborne & Gaebler, 1993; Denhardt & Denhardt, 2003). Citizens can be seen as subjects (who are expected to obey the law), voters, customers, and participants in (interactive) policy-making processes. Although there are differences between the public and private sectors, we maintain that citizens also receive services such as health care and education and thus that the use of the “customers” concept is relevant in the public sector (e.g., Bouckaert & Thijs, 2003).

In order to bolster the emerging but still underdeveloped conceptualization of communication about potential policies, this paper more specifically aims to

- (1) apply a framework primarily used in business service marketing to improve service quality;
- (2) identify some problems practitioners may experience when attempting to implement this framework; and
- (3) draw normative conclusions looking both at what practitioners may do and what the public can do in order to improve public communication about potential policies.

The following section briefly discusses the concept of service before introducing the business service framework (“gap analysis model”).

2. Service and service quality

Based on literature about “goods” and “services” (e.g., Bouckaert & Thijs, 2003), we consider the communication process about potential policies in the first instance as a service. The quality of service delivery strongly depends on customers' expectations and perceptions.

Services are intangible and short-lived: they are first “sold” (delivered) and then produced and consumed in nearly the same moment while goods are first produced, then sold (delivered) and finally consumed. Consequently, the role of the consumer in determining the output of the service delivery is important. Moreover, the consumer can be the source of his or her own dissatisfaction with service delivery. For example, the fact that citizens can be confused about the status of announced potential policies can partly be explained by their own role in the receiving process. People may believe their version of reality regardless of the clarity with which ministers or the media communicated the status of the potential policy. Services are immaterial – they have no material body or form – and thus, expectations about their consumption play an important role. Expectations are determined by several factors such as interpersonal communication, personal needs and experiences, and external communication about the service delivery. Each service results from the interaction between producers and consumers and is thus unique. Consequently, services are not standardized products. This implies that standardization and monitoring of services is complicated, *a fortiori* in a public sector characterized by political and media interference (Gelders et al., 2007).

The intangibility, heterogeneity, and shortness of service production and consumption imply a lack of objective yardsticks with which to measure the quality of service delivery organizations. Consequently, subjective customer value judgments are especially important. But, as Bouckaert and Vandeweyer (1999) state, “customers are not

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