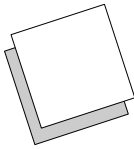


An executive summary for managers and executive readers can be found at the end of this article



How do consumers evaluate Internet retail service quality?

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Keywords *Internet, Marketing, Service quality, Customer surveys, Consumer attitudes*

Abstract *The conceptualization and assessment of service quality continues to play an important role in marketing for both academics and practitioners alike. This study extends the service quality literature by utilizing semi-structured depth interviews with 58 online shoppers to uncover key aspects of Internet service quality. Results indicate that consumers evaluate the service of Internet marketers in terms of five major dimensions: performance, access, security, sensation, and information. While marketing academicians may use the study's findings as a framework to develop measures to empirically assess Internet service quality, online retailers may use our findings as a resource while constructing, managing, and evaluating their marketing strategies.*

Introduction

The conceptualization and assessment of service quality continues to play an important role in marketing for both academics and practitioners alike. The SERVQUAL scale was developed in an attempt to measure how consumers perceive the quality of a service (Parasuraman *et al.*, 1985, 1988, 1991, 1994). The most recent version of this scale comprises five dimensions:

- (1) tangibles;
- (2) reliability;
- (3) responsiveness;
- (4) assurance; and
- (5) empathy (Parasuraman *et al.*, 1994).

Current discourse among marketing academics and practitioners suggests that in order to accurately assess service quality in different industry settings, modifications of the SERVQUAL scale may be warranted (Carman, 1990; Dean, 1999). Recent studies have tested the validity of the SERVQUAL scale in different industries including healthcare (Dean, 1999), gas and utilities (Babakus and Boller, 1992), and retail banking (Lam, 1995). Online marketing is one area where research pertaining to service quality is lacking. Although the number of individuals purchasing products over the Internet continues to increase, the decline and failure of such high-profile e-commerce sites as pets.com, priceline.com, and vroom.com, help to emphasize the importance of maintaining a high level of service quality in this highly competitive venue. Through phenomenological interviews with

The authors would like to thank Daniel Dilworth for his assistance on this project.

SERVQUAL scale

Different industries



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Internet users, this study attempts to fulfill this research gap by developing a preliminary set of Internet service quality dimensions. Further, we describe how online retailers can use this information to enhance their marketing strategies.

Data collection

The next section outlines the method employed for data collection and analysis. This is followed by a description of the five dimensions of Internet service quality that were derived from the interviews. Implications of these results are then discussed.

Method

Semi-structured interviews employing techniques derived from the existential-phenomenological paradigm constituted the primary method of data collection (Thompson *et al.*, 1989). This paradigm has been used in recent consumer research studies (e.g. Price *et al.*, 2000; Thompson and Haytko, 1997) and obliges informants to describe specific life-events pertaining to the topic of study (Thompson *et al.*, 1989). Our aim was to tap consumers' feelings and perceptions regarding online shopping. This was accomplished by asking informants to describe their experiences with Web sites that allowed them to make online purchases. Thus, our research focused on two (online storefronts and virtual malls) of the six functional categories of commercial online activity (Hoffman and Novak, 1996)[1].

Internet shopping experiences

At the outset, informants were asked to participate in an academic study regarding Internet shopping experiences and were instructed that their comments would be kept confidential. Informants chose the interview location in order to foster a relaxed atmosphere that precipitated a candid discussion (McCracken, 1988; Thompson *et al.*, 1989). Interview guides were used to ensure that pertinent issues were covered (McCracken, 1988; Patton, 1990).

A total of 58 interviews, ranging in duration from 25 minutes to two hours, were conducted by the two primary investigators and 14 marketing research students trained in phenomenological interviewing techniques (Lincoln and Guba, 1985; Patton, 1990). Such a data collection procedure has been employed in prior consumer research studies (see Price *et al.*, 2000). All students received course credit for their participation. The primary investigators verified the authenticity of the interviews by contacting a random sample of one out of every three informants. Study participants comprised 30 women and 28 men ranging in age from 14 to 62. Educational levels ranged from grammar school to doctorate. All interviews were tape recorded and transcribed.

Hermeneutic logic

Analysis and emergent themes

The two primary investigators and a research assistant independently coded data from each interview. The authors analyzed the interview transcripts using hermeneutic logic. Such logic involves an iterative process of reading, documenting, and systematizing the data (Thompson *et al.*, 1989). Marginal comments representing abstractions from experience-near (Geertz, 1979; Thompson, 1996) descriptions were made alongside each transcript. "Fear of credit card theft" and "invasion of privacy" are examples of marginal comments. These and similar comments were subsequently organized into the theme of "security." Such a process resulted in the five dimensions of Internet service quality that are described below. A literature search was conducted for information pertaining to each dimension as it was discovered (Thompson, 1996). A rough draft of an initial version of the manuscript was

Five dimensions

presented to three Internet-using informants for their comments. The final version of the manuscript reflects their suggested changes.

The following discussion pertains to the five dimensions of Internet service quality that were uncovered in this study (for a brief overview, see Table I). Included in each theme is a selected sample of representative quotes provided by informants.

Performance

In this context, performance is characterized by how well a firm accomplishes the set of tasks that customers expect it to perform. Our informants routinely alluded to two major aspects of performance. These were termed delivery fulfillment and transaction efficiency.

Errors in processing

Delivery fulfillment. This aspect of performance pertains to customers' confidence in a firm's ability to process their online order without error, and if errors in processing occur, the ability and willingness of the firm to rectify the mistake with minimum hassle to the consumer. The following quotes illustrate customers' concerns regarding delivery fulfillment:

I purchased clothing, but the seller sent me the wrong item. So, I sent it back, but the seller didn't credit my account. I had to call them and e-mail them several times to get my money back. I got really angry (female, 28).

I was worried about the purchase after I made it. I thought they may have misinterpreted my order. I called the 1-800 number on the site and a very nice man helped track my order, and make sure I bought the right thing. I had a great experience (female, 22).

Sub-dimension of performance

Transaction efficiency. This sub-dimension of performance reflects a customer's perception of the speed with which Web sites can be accessed and viewed. For example, long load times and navigation difficulties reflect inferior transaction efficiency (Nelson and James, 1996). In addition, transaction efficiency also includes the degree of promptness with which orders are confirmed, processed, and delivered.

Everything was pretty prompt, like usually if I ordered something I would receive a confirmation from the company within like a couple of hours (female, 21).

I don't like waiting forever for a page to come up, and I don't like having to fill out huge order forms asking for all kinds of irrelevant information (male, 48).

Long download times and poor layout of the links really try my patience. Sometimes I get so frustrated that I just log off (female, 40).

Dimension	Description
Performance	How well does an online marketer accomplish the set of tasks that customers expect it to perform? Performance includes delivery fulfillment and transaction efficiency
Access	To what extent does an online marketer provide a wide variety of products from all over the world? Access includes variety and universality
Security	To what extent does an online marketer foster perceptions of trust, assurance, and freedom from risk? Security concerns comprise financial as well as non-financial issues
Sensation	To what extent does an Internet service provider pay attention to aesthetic aspects of the online shopping experience?
Information	What is the nature of information provided by an online marketer? Information includes quantity and credibility considerations

Table I. Dimensions of Internet service quality

Two elements

Access

Access refers to customers' perceptions that a wide variety of products from all over the world is available to them. The access dimension consists of two elements: variety and universality.

Variety. The variety sub-dimension reflects a customer's perception that a wide assortment of models and brands within a given product category can be accessed via the Internet. Research suggests that product variety is an important factor underlying the success of a commercial Web site (Spiteri, 2000). Several informants felt that purchasing online often provided a wider range of product options compared to purchasing in traditional brick-and-mortar outlets:

Shopping on the Internet lets you see many stores and brands that you cannot see at every department store or even at malls (male, 35).

I can easily compare the prices of similar items. It is easier to do that on the Web than running from store to store. I can also have more variety of choices at a time (female, 28).

Global network

Universality. Universality was best described by one of our informants as "the world at your fingertips". The Internet, with its ability to connect a global network of servers electronically, facilitates the consumer's ability to conveniently shop for products from all over the world. Our informants alluded to the notion that the Internet has brought many retail products closer to them. The following quotes illustrate the Internet's ability to provide convenient access to products from all over the world:

If you are not living in a big city or part of the country where you have access to ethnic supermarkets or restaurants, the Internet is a great life saver (male, 62).

Yes, we can purchase products from all over the world with relative ease and I believe this is a very awesome task we can do (female, 22).

Well, I live in western Kansas and I don't have access to a lot of retail outlets. So I use the Internet to shop for stuff I couldn't buy otherwise (male, 23).

I find myself exhilarated with the success of finding an item online that I would have spent hours looking for on a shopping trip to a major city (female, 58).

Financial and non-financial sources

Security

Informants' security concerns stemmed from both financial and non-financial sources. Such concerns reflected the informants' needs for trust, assurance, and freedom from risk. Prior studies have illustrated the importance of security in consumers' online purchase decisions (e.g. Watson *et al.*, 2000). The following paragraphs demonstrate the financial and non-financial risks discussed by the informants:

Financial. The most significant security concern expressed by our informants was the risk involved in using credit cards while purchasing online. Informants often conveyed concerns regarding the possibility of their credit card numbers becoming available to unknown others. (For a detailed description, see Sager, 2000; Thomas, 1999.) The following quotes illustrate these sentiments:

I personally do not feel safe putting credit card numbers over the Web. I don't trust it (male, 55).

When you give your credit card out that's pretty scary. I haven't heard of anything really, but I can see hackers trying to get the information and that's pretty scary (female, 22).

Monitoring activities

When I first started using the Internet I was scared to put my credit card number on there because of the security risk. But since I've used it, I think it's relatively safe. I would like it to have better security in the future though (female, 36).

I made it all the way through the checkout, including filling in my personal info and credit card number, but I just couldn't bring myself to push the "submit" button. I just don't feel safe having my account number in a computer system that is vulnerable to hackers (male, 25).

Non-financial. Several informants expressed non-financial security concerns when asked about Internet shopping. These included perceptions that their Internet activities were being monitored (e.g. by the government, marketing organizations, and/or Internet service providers). Further, our informants felt that monitoring activities lead to negative consequences such as being placed on mass-mailing lists. Online privacy issues, including monitoring, continue to concern consumers (Stevens, 1999). The following quotes express some of these concerns:

My biggest concern about Internet shopping is exposing myself to the fact that people might be able to obtain personal information about me (female, 23).

Lack of privacy – I don't like that at all. Just the other day I was doing a search and I got into a porn site. I could not get out for the life of me. I didn't ask to visit that site. It just popped up. Plus, they can track you with these little cookies they put on you. It's the whole privacy factor. They are invading your personal life (male, 52).

Visual and auditory stimulation

Sensation

Sensation encompasses the aesthetics of the Internet shopping experience. It includes customer-salesperson interaction, socializing with others, as well as the visual and auditory stimulation provided both by the retail environment and the merchandise. Informants often expressed the idea that traditional brick-and-mortar retailers offered an aesthetic environment that they thought could not be replaced by virtual transactions. Recent research in this area illustrates this notion (Trocchia and Janda, 2000). The following quotes highlight informants' views regarding importance of the retail environment:

Yeah it's easy to use because I enjoy the pictures and you know more about what you're purchasing. But you can't feel them or try them on (female, 21).

I don't want to buy something that doesn't fit or looks good on a page, but looks terrible on (female, 21).

I like to feel the material by touching it. For CDs or books it doesn't matter (female, 26).

Service quality

An area of service quality where informants felt the Internet fell short in relation to brick and mortar retailers concerned lack of visual and tactile contact with online merchandise. This is illustrated in the following quotes:

I really like to see things in person or try things on and the sites that I visited just weren't that exciting (female, 46).

If I had my choice, I would rather go to the store. I guess I want to have the whole shopping experience and be able to say I knew what I was getting into (female, 45).

I don't feel safe shopping on the Internet. I like to try on stuff like clothes and shoes before I buy it (female, 21).

However, it is interesting to note that, regarding customer-salesperson interaction, some informants preferred online shopping because of a lack of salesperson presence:

There is no personal contact between seller and buyer. Sometimes, going shopping in real life is an annoying thing to do (male, 29).

Source of information

Information

Most informants considered the Internet as an important source of information. Two aspects of information were mentioned in the interviews: quantity and credibility. Whereas quantity pertains to the amount of information available to the consumer, credibility refers to the trustworthiness of the information source.

Quantity of information. Most informants stated that they used the Internet for checking product availability and making price, feature, and quality comparisons. Informants expressed both positive and negative feelings with respect to searching information over the Internet. Many informants welcomed the Internet as a convenient and powerful research tool. The following statements highlight the Internet as a positive information source:

It is really easy for me to type in a product name and get six or eight Web sites that I can quickly price compare and make a purchase (male, 25).

Whenever I make a large purchase I like to find out as much about the product as I can. It's incredible how much information you can find on the Internet (male, 47).

I had no idea where to find a Christmas present for my father. So I looked on the Web and it was really easy. I finally ended up finding a present on a sporting goods store Web site (female, 23).

However, some frustrated informants expressed that online searches often resulted in retrieval of too much information, irrelevant information, or a lack of information. The following quotes express these sentiments:

I put in the word "Barbie" and got like, 5,000 hits. Where do you go from there? (female, 32).

Probably the advantage (of the Internet) is that you have all the information in the world basically at your fingertips. But if you don't know how to find it, you end up with nothing (male, 22).

Second sub-dimension

Credibility. Credibility emerged as the second sub-dimension of information. It reflects a customer's trust in an information source based on the source's reputation and the customer's prior experience (Ganesan, 1994). Factors enhancing information credibility included previous reputation of the firm and availability of a representative of the firm with whom to communicate. Prior research has found that online purchase decisions are often influenced by the credibility of the website (Kovar *et al.*, 2000). The following quotes illustrate the nature of this sub-dimension:

If I go to a reputable site, I believe the information that they give about themselves and their competitors. For instance I visited the BMW site and they gave information about how their model compares with an Audi . . . I trusted the information (male, 27).

I do consider myself to be somewhat conservative, so often times I will only visit brand name sites or sites that I've heard good things about (male, 51).

I felt more comfortable with the information that they gave me (on the Web site) when I called up their 800 number and talked to a lady who verified everything. I just wanted to be re-assured.

Theoretical implications

Analysis of depth interview data suggests that consumers perceive online service quality to consist of five dimensions:

- (1) performance;
- (2) access;
- (3) security;
- (4) sensation; and
- (5) information.

Reliability and responsiveness

Our exploratory results enhance the service quality literature by extending the SERVQUAL framework to the realm of online marketing. Although the five dimensions of Internet service quality uncovered in this study overlap somewhat with those of SERVQUAL, important differences emerged.

Our performance dimension includes elements of the reliability and responsiveness dimensions of SERVQUAL. Further, the sensation dimension corresponds with SERVQUAL's tangibles and empathy dimensions, while similarities exist between our security dimension and the SERVQUAL dimension of assurance. Access and information emerged as characteristics unique to Internet service quality. Online consumers placed an exceptional emphasis on the access sub-dimensions of variety and universality. Similarly, these consumers regarded information credibility and quantity as particularly important attributes of service quality among Internet retailers.

The dimensions of online service quality revealed in this study need to be tested and validated using multi-item measures and a large-scale sample. Such testing would extend the SERVQUAL framework to the online domain and would help establish a valid and reliable Internet service quality measure.

Recent shakeout

Managerial implications

The recent shakeout in the dot.com arena indicates that those online retailers emphasizing customer orientation may be the best-suited for survival and success. By examining the five dimensions uncovered in this study, online retailers can develop a better understanding of their customers' needs. Armed with this understanding, online marketers may develop strategies to help them compete and thrive in this venue.

Our research shows that online consumers are concerned not only with favorable outcomes, but also with satisfying shopping processes. Thus, low price and quick delivery may not be enough to attract and retain customers. Proactive online marketers may wish to attend to such factors as access to a wide range of goods and services, transaction security, Web site aesthetics, and information quantity and credibility. These factors are elaborated upon in the following paragraphs.

Shopping process

Online consumers wish to have access to a wide variety of goods at a given Web site. Such variety reduces the need for them to jump from one site to another, thus enhancing the efficiency of the shopping process. Customers who live in remote areas and those who have been transplanted to foreign locations may be particularly interested in having goods available to them that are not available locally. Numerous respondents felt that the goods offered by online retailers improved the quality of their lives. By providing such services, Internet retailers can foster a strong sense of customer loyalty and repeat purchase behavior.

Security issues both financial and non-financial – are very important to online shoppers. Although most financial companies offer protection against

Proactive online retailers

credit card theft, many consumers are still wary of sharing credit card information with online retailers. Retailers may wish to better educate their customers regarding the security of their billing and payment systems. If the Web site has experienced few problems involving transaction security, the online firm may wish to promote their excellent track record. Online retailers may also consider disclosing the steps taken to safeguard personal information about their customers from other marketers.

Interestingly, while some consumers value salesperson input into their purchase decisions, others regard salespeople as intrusive. Online retailers who offer sales assistance may wish to provide their regular customers with the option of automatically connecting with a sales associate or shopping on their own. This may enable them to differentiate and better target these two distinct customer segments.

Finally, the Internet has a reputation for providing information that may not always be credible (Kovar *et al.*, 2000). Proactive online retailers can provide hotlinks to watchdog organizations such as Bizrate.com and the Better Business Bureau (BBB.org) so that customers can be reassured that they are dealing with a reputable online marketer. Information credibility may be further enhanced by offering generous return policies and access to a live customer service representative.

In conclusion, this study represents an initial attempt to uncover dimensions of service quality specific to the Internet. These dimensions may be used by online retailers to help formulate effective marketing strategies. Since our framework is only based on one sample, additional design and testing is necessary to advance our understanding of Internet service quality.

Note

1. The other four functional categories of commercial activity on the Web were Internet presence sites, content sites, incentive sites, and search agents.

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This summary has been provided to allow managers and executives a rapid appreciation of the content of this article. Those with a particular interest in the topic covered may then read the article in toto to take advantage of the more comprehensive description of the research undertaken and its results to get the full benefit of the material present

Executive summary and implications for managers and executives

Dimensions of Internet service quality

The SERVQUAL scale – comprising tangibles, reliability, responsiveness, assurance and empathy – was developed to measure how consumers perceive the quality of a service. Trocchia and Janda investigate how modifications to the SERVQUAL scale may provide better insights into service quality in online marketing. Through interviews with Internet users, the researchers uncover dimensions of Internet service quality.

Performance

Customers must be confident of a firm's ability to confirm, process and deliver their online order correctly and speedily. If mistakes occur, the company must be able and willing to put matters right with minimum hassle to the customer. A further aspect of performance is that the customer expects Web sites to load quickly and be easy to navigate.

Access

Customers expect to be able to access a wide assortment of models and brands within a given product category. Clients highlight the Internet's ability to provide convenient access to products from all over the world. Having access to a wide variety of goods at one Web site reduces the need for customers to move from one site to another.

Customers who live in remote areas, or abroad, may be particularly interested in having goods available to them that are not available locally. A number of interviewees felt that the goods offered by online retailers improved the quality of their lives. By providing such services, Internet retailers can foster a strong sense of customer loyalty and repeat purchase behaviour.

Security

Customers' most significant security concern is the risk involved in using credit cards when purchasing online. Some people also expressed fears that their Internet activities were being monitored, perhaps by the government, marketing organizations or the Internet service provider. They were also concerned about being placed on mass mailing lists.

Retailers may wish to educate their customers about the security of their billing and payment systems. If the Web site has experienced few transaction-security problems, the online firm may wish to promote its track record. Online retailers may also consider disclosing the steps taken to safeguard personal information about their customers from other marketers.

Sensation

Many interviewees expressed the idea that shops offer an environment that the Internet cannot replicate. In particular, they liked to be able to see and touch the merchandise. However, some people preferred Internet shopping because they did not have to deal with a salesperson.

Online retailers who offer sales assistance may wish to provide their regular customers with the option of automatically connecting with a salesperson or shopping on their own.

Information

Most interviewees used the Internet for checking product availability and comparing prices, features and quality. While many people welcomed the

Internet as a powerful and convenient research tool, others said that online searches brought up either too much or too little information, or information that was irrelevant.

Online purchase decisions are often influenced by the credibility of the Web site. Customers must be able to trust an information source because of its reputation or because of their previous experience of dealing with it. Online retailers can provide hotlinks to watchdog organizations so that customers can be reassured that they are dealing with a reputable marketer. The credibility of information may be further improved by offering generous return policies and access to a live customer-service representative.

The new classification's relationship with SERVQUAL

The "performance" category put forward by Trocchia and Janda includes elements of the reliability and responsiveness dimensions of SERVQUAL. The "sensation" dimension corresponds with SERVQUAL's tangibles and empathy dimensions, while similarities exist between Trocchia and Janda's "security" dimension and the SERVQUAL dimension of assurance. Access and information are characteristics unique to Internet service quality.

(A précis of the article "How do consumers evaluate Internet retail service quality?". Supplied by Marketing Consultants for Emerald.)