Strategies Used to Monitor and Control Service Quality: A Case Study of Restaurants in Nairobi City

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Abstract
Service quality (SQ) plays an important role in the success of any service establishment. The purpose of the current study was to assess the strategies used in the process of monitoring and controlling SQ in the restaurant business. Specifically, the study aimed to establish what is involved in monitoring and controlling SQ, to identify the challenges encountered in monitoring and controlling SQ, to establish what restaurants are doing to overcome these challenges and to determine the most effective strategies in monitoring and controlling SQ. A case study design was adopted with primary data being collected through questionnaires and semi-structured interviews. A sample of 60 staff respondents were chosen while all managers and supervisors of restaurants involved in the study qualified to be part of the respondents. However, only 35 questionnaires were filled and returned. The major findings from the study indicated that all restaurants carry out monitoring and controlling of SQ. The control of SQ is done mostly through use of some process standards manual. However, there is more reliance on supervision and verbal guidance than a strict manual. Monitoring of SQ is done on a daily basis by a majority of restaurants through close supervision. Of all the indicators of SQ, 'sales' was highly ranked. Some of the challenges encountered during monitoring and controlling of SQ included diversity among customers with dissimilar needs and expectations, and employees giving varied responses to quality issues. It is recommended that efforts to improve team work among staff must be made.
Keywords: Service quality; Strategy; Monitoring and controlling; Restaurants; Nairobi.

1. Introduction

Satisfied customers are likely to return and buy more. They tell other people about their experiences, and they may well pay a premium for the privilege of using the services of an establishment they trust. According to Berry (1990), various studies have shown that it generally costs four or five times more to win new customers than to keep the ones you already have. Therefore, when an establishment wins a customer, it should hang on to them. Throughout the service industry, there is evidence that quality is a matter of long term survival. It may be the foundation of the competitive edge. Quality is often considered to be one of the keys to success. The needs of customers have never been as demanding and neither has the competition been so intense and challenging. Winning the confidence and loyalty of customers by constantly delivering quality services is essential to any establishment's survival. However, getting to know what the desired quality by customers is and subsequently heeding is neither the end nor enough. It is just the first step. Quality service provision should be a continuous process which depends on the consistent understanding of the changing needs and wants of the customers (Berry, 1990).

Therefore, monitoring and controlling SQ in an establishment like a restaurant is of utmost importance. It not only assures that an establishment satisfies its customers, but also ensures it delights them, retains, attracts more customers and ultimately reduces the cost of losing customers. These two aspects are important components of quality management. All organizations, be they service or manufacturing have one major objective in common - to improve productivity and profit. Service quality (SQ) has a definite effect on productivity and profit. Poor quality drives customers away and the bottom line is that, it is the customer who dictates the quality of any service. Everyone in the organization is responsible for maintaining the desired quality. In a restaurant, this includes the managers, kitchen staff, the service staff and all other workers like the cleaners. They all contribute to the general quality of services and products on offer.

There are costs attributed to poor quality. They include wastage of raw materials and other resources, rework, complaint handling, fines, defect investigations, among others. These costs can be viewed as erosion of assets. Customers are a vital asset (Berry, 1990).

Restaurants are in the business of serving food to their customers. In other words, they provide a product (food) and a service (waiting on the customer). The quality of the food and service is defined as meeting or exceeding the expectations of the customer as promised by the restaurant. The food should be properly prepared and the service should be prompt and courteous. The benefit of quality food and service is that customers will come back and will recommend the restaurant to friends. Getting the quality right the first time is important but, an establishment needs to get the quality right all the time. This is done through continuous monitoring and controlling of the pre-determined quality.

However, little research has been done on the strategies of monitoring and controlling SQ and especially in the

Kenyan restaurant industry. There is little documented information available pertaining to this issue. This study is of utmost importance since the information that will be gained on how monitoring and controlling of SQ is carried out in a restaurant, the challenges faced and how these establishments deal with them will go a long way towards helping current and future restaurateurs and managers in their management and running of their restaurants. The purpose of this research was therefore to identify how monitoring and controlling of SQ in a restaurant is carried out, the effectiveness of the strategies being used, the challenges faced while doing so, and how the restaurants deal with them. Specifically, the study sought to accomplish the following objectives: to establish what is involved in monitoring SQ in a restaurant; to establish what is involved in controlling SQ in a restaurant; to identify the challenges faced by a restaurant in monitoring and controlling SQ; to find out what different restaurants have done to overcome these challenges; and to establish the most effective strategies in monitoring and controlling of SQ.

2. Research methodology

The research adopted a case study design which sought to describe in detail how restaurants in Nairobi area monitor and control SQ and the challenges encountered while doing so. In a case study, a great deal can be learned from a few examples of the phenomena under study (Kombo and Tromp, 2006). This study was mapped on a similar concern. The case study design generally entails intensive, descriptive and holistic analysis of a single entity. For the purpose of this study the case study designs studies a single entity in depth in order to gain insight into the larger cases. This design was chosen as a study of these restaurants since it allowed an in-depth investigation of monitoring and controlling of service quality in the establishments.

The primary data was collected through questionnaires and semi-structured interviews while the Internet and books were the main sources of secondary data. The sampling technique adopted was simple random sampling. The target populations for the study were the managers, supervisors and the staff of restaurants in the Nairobi area. A sample of 60 staff respondents were chosen while all managers and supervisors of the restaurants involved in the study qualified to be part of the respondents. However, only 35 questionnaires were filled, returned and used. The primary data collected was analyzed using SPSS statistical computer package. Descriptive analysis was used to generate frequencies, proportions, tables and charts.

3. Result

The results revealed that 77.1% of the respondents were waiters or waitresses, the head chef and chefs made up a total of 8.6% while the barmen and coffee barristers made up 8.6% and 5.7% of the respondents, respectively. The high number of waiters/waitresses could be because they are the people in contact with customers and have the major responsibility of service delivery. Therefore, the quality of service on offer is highly dependent on the performance of this group of workers and consequently, the processes of monitoring and controlling of service quality are applied to a large extent on them.

Besides, the results disclosed that that 88.6% were aged between 18-34 years while only a small percentage of staff (11.4%) were aged 35 and above. Further the results indicate that a majority of restaurant staff were youthful (18-34 years). This might be because of the nature of the work which requires agile people and keeping odd hours. The remaining 11.4% were the head chefs, barmen or coffee barristers. These occupations need several years of experience and are not as physically taxing or exhaustive as those of waiters or waitresses.

Out of the 35 respondents, 48.6% indicated that understanding pre-established standards was 'very vital' in controlling service quality, while 37.1% regarded it as 'quite vital'. In addition, 94.3% indicated measurement of service quality as either being 'very vital' or 'quite vital'. Even though the analysis of results of customer satisfaction surveys was ranked by the majority of respondents (54.3%) as being 'very vital', an additional 5.7% ranked it as 'not vital at all'. Evaluation of service quality was ranked by 48.7% of the respondents as being 'very vital', while a total of 8.6% ranked it as either 'not very effective' or 'not effective at all'. Correction of defects was regarded as being 'very vital' and 'quite vital' by a total of 97.1% while the additional 2.9% regarded it as 'not very vital'.

3.1 Establishing what and who is involved in monitoring service quality

The findings showed that the respondents were responsible for the provision and delivering of service to clients. From figure 4.3 below, a majority of the respondents (77.8%) cited observation as one of the ways through which their work was monitored. The use of customer feedback as a way of monitoring the quality of their work was cited by 22.2% of the respondents. Managers were cited by 44.4% of the respondents as the persons who monitor the work of employees while 55.6% indicated that it was the supervisors who monitored employee's work and hence the quality of the service on offer. From the managers and supervisors interview responses, all indicated that monitoring is done through regular supervision.

When asked about the effectiveness of the different service control strategies 82.9% of staff rated correction of defects as either 'very effective' or 'quite effective' while 5.8% of the staff ranked it as either 'not at all effective' or 'not used'. The remaining 11.4% indicated that it was 'not very effective'. Checking conformance and setting product standards were both rated by 9% of the staff as being 'very effective' while 28.6% ranked designing

quality levels as 'very effective'.

When asked to indicate their level of agreement or disagreement with the effectiveness of a given item used in monitoring service quality, findings revealed that 88.6% of the staff stated that sales was the most effective item used in monitoring service quality by indicating that they 'strongly agreed'. An additional 11.4% also regarded growth of customer base and results of customer satisfaction surveys as 'strongly agree'. About 60% of the respondents also indicated that earnings and employee perception of quality are very effective items of monitoring service quality by ranking them as 'strongly agree'. The majority of respondents (71.4%) indicated their disagreement with the use of number of customers per employee in monitoring service quality. It was also noted that none of the respondents indicated that they 'strongly disagree' on any of the items used in monitoring service quality.

From the interview sessions with restaurant managers and supervisors, the growth of customer base and number of repeat customers is monitored on a daily and weekly basis for some restaurants while others do it on an annual basis. This is done through random count. The number of customers per employee at a time is done through a head count. The number of complaints are written down and corrected there and then. One of the restaurants indicated that they use a customer comments book for these purposes. These complaints are then summarized weekly. To assess how employees feel about the quality of service offered, the restaurant managers use verbal feedback. Only one of the restaurants had quality improvement teams which were four in number and the manager stated that they were 50% effective.

The respondents were asked to indicate who they think should be responsible for the monitoring and controlling of service quality in their establishment. The results showed that none of the respondents thought that the directors and the senior management should be responsible for the control and monitoring of service quality. The majority of the respondents (65.7%) indicated that individual departmental manager should be responsible for the control and monitoring of service quality. A considerable percentage (34.3%) also indicated that everybody should be responsible for the control and monitoring of service quality. None of the respondents indicated 'don't know' regarding the question of who should be responsible for the control and monitoring of service quality.

The respondents were asked to indicate whether the monitoring done on their work had any impact on the overall service quality. The results disclosed that a majority of the respondents (77%) stated that monitoring did have an impact on the overall quality of the service offering while the remaining 23% stated that it did not have any impact on the service quality.

4. Discussion

According to Johns *et al.* (1994), control is the process of setting and monitoring performance targets. This implies that it is the process of deciding the extent to which the standards are to be met, then ensuring they are met every time. The study findings indicate that the majority of the respondents (48.6%) agreed that understanding pre-determined standards is 'very vital' in controlling service quality. These standards are targets against which subsequent performances are to be measured. This is one the aspects in controlling service quality. This implies that most of the respondents needed to understand pre-determined standards if the quality of service was to be controlled. The pre-determined standards are available in the establishment's process standards manual. From the findings, a majority of the respondents (85.2%) stated that they were aware of the presence of the manual. However, only 22.2% had access to the manual and an additional 63% did not completely understand the contents of the manual. The consequence of this is that, a majority of staff do not understand the pre-determined standards even though they admit that it is very vital for the control of service quality. From the interview sessions with restaurant managers and a supervisor, holding regular meetings, annual trainings and briefings before and after service delivery are some of the ways that restaurants ensure that employees understand pre-determined standards. Even though the analysis of results of customer satisfaction surveys was ranked by the majority of respondents (54.3%) as being 'very vital', 5.7% ranked it as 'not vital at all'. Customer satisfaction surveys are important to gauge the response of customers to the quality of service on offer. Customer satisfaction surveys can be carried out using questionnaires, guest comments books and suggestion boxes (Berry, 1990). These surveys are in a bid to isolate and deal with the causes of dissatisfaction. The high rating of this aspect of service control implies that the staff recognizes the importance of customer feedback, for in service, the customer is always right and the service delivery should at all times aim to satisfy the customer. From the findings on the effectiveness of the various strategies used in service quality control, 82.9% of staff rated correction of defects as either 'very effective' or 'quite effective'. This can be interpreted to mean that as long as there is great service recovery, then the service on offer can be controlled successfully. Further, the managers indicated that they use customer feedback to measure the quality of service on offer. The management also assist staff meet and even exceed standards through regular monitoring, verbal feedback and reinforcements, and short courses on issues relating to services.

4.1 Determining what is involved in monitoring service quality

The study findings indicate that 88.6% of the staff stated that 'sales' was the most effective item used in

monitoring service quality. According to Barry (1990), 'sales' is one of the key indicators that need to be monitored in order to see whether desired quality levels are attained. This can be interpreted to mean that if sales are high and at desired levels, then the quality of service on offer is good and vice versa. However, Barry (1990) adds that in the long term, none of the financial indicators like sales will reach target levels unless customers are delighted. Therefore, all respondents indicated that they either 'strongly agree' or 'agree' with the use of the results of customer satisfaction surveys as an indicator of the current quality of services on offer. These surveys help an establishment know whether they are satisfying their customers or not, and take appropriate actions. The findings also yielded results on how different restaurants monitor their employees' work, which has great effect on the quality of service delivered to the customer. These results are especially relevant since 77.1% of the respondents were either waiters or waitresses and are constantly in contact with customers. The findings indicate that a majority of the respondents cited observation as one of the ways through which their work was monitored. Observation was done by either managers (44.4%) or supervisors (55.6%). This method goes hand in hand with correction of defects. This is due to the fact that during observation, defects are noted and corrective measures are taken. The use of customer feedback as a way of monitoring the quality of their work was cited by 22.2% of the respondents. This method also goes hand in hand with the customer satisfaction survey. The respondents were also asked to indicate whether the monitoring done on their work had any impact on the overall service quality. The results show that a majority of the respondents (77%) stated that monitoring had an impact on the overall quality of the service offering. The high positive response implies that most of the respondents support monitoring of the service delivery and that it has a positive effect on the overall quality.

4.2 Determining who should be responsible for the control and monitoring of service quality
An analysis of the study findings indicates that directors and senior management should not be responsible for monitoring and controlling service quality. This is according to all respondents who indicated that 'no' directors and senior management should be responsible for monitoring and controlling service quality. This is due to their unavailability or their lack of involvement in the day to day running of the restaurant. The processes of monitoring and controlling service quality require that those involved have an intricate understanding of all elements of the service on offer and the delivery process. These two principles, by virtue of their job descriptions do not necessarily understand. The majority of the respondents (65.7%) indicated that the individual department manager should be responsible for the control and monitoring of service quality. This is because in a restaurant setting, the departmental managers are in charge of the day to day running of the restaurant, and hence responsible for the quality of service that gets to the customer. A considerable percentage, 34.3% also indicated that everybody should be responsible for the control and monitoring of service quality. This means that to some degree, the responsibility of monitoring and controlling the quality of service on offer falls on everybody involved in one way or the other in its production and delivery to the customer.

4.3 Challenges encountered in monitoring and controlling service quality
The findings are derived from the interview of two managers and a supervisor from each of the restaurants involved in the study. An analysis of the study findings shows that each restaurant has its own challenges when it comes to monitoring and controlling service quality. This could be because the three restaurants involved have different star ratings and different target customers. The ratings of the restaurants were three, four and five stars. Another reason could be because of the different strategies employed in monitoring and controlling service quality hence the different challenges. The challenges highlighted by the managers and supervisor in monitoring service quality included employees giving divergent responses and opinions when quality is being assessed. This could be a challenge because employees are an important element in the service quality equation and their input is vital for the successful monitoring of service quality. This goes hand in hand with one of the variables monitored in the restaurant. According to Berry (1990) the variable is how employees feel about the quality of service on offer and the effectiveness of monitoring on the overall quality of service. When customers complain about a particular service component like the cuisine, yet the restaurant does not find anything wrong was another challenge that was identified. This challenge could arise when dealing with difficult customers (which is a common occurrence as per the managers), or if the restaurant has not done sufficient market research on its target customers. Whatever, the reason, it is difficult to monitor service quality when restaurants receive complaints on a service component they perceive to be fine. Another challenge that was cited was intangibility, which is a characteristic of service (Gronroos, 2000) that makes it difficult for not only customers, but also service providers to evaluate a service. One of the mangers stated that 'service is not tangible and hence every client has different expectations'. Due to this nature of service, the process of monitoring its quality becomes a challenge. The restaurant has to cater for a large spectrum of customers with diverse needs and expectations. The challenge cited in the control of service quality include the presence of varied types of customers, hence the constant need for the restaurant to adjust operations so as to stay in business. The other challenge is unavailability of all staff on all training days because of the nature of the restaurant industry whereby the employees work in shifts or part time basis.

4.4 Dealing with the challenges encountered in monitoring and controlling service quality
The study findings indicate that researching on what customers want, their expectations and the restaurant's

strong points is one of the strategies of dealing with some of the challenges discussed earlier. One of the managers indicated that in dealing with the challenge of varied customer types, the restaurant tries to maintain their repeat buyers and so tend to lean towards what they prefer in order to keep them coming back. This strategy of dealing with this challenge can be further explained by the fundamental truth that it is cheaper to retain a customer than to attract a new one. The same manager indicated that they ensure they have knowledgeable employees, who simplify the whole process of monitoring service quality in many ways including the provision and delivery of quality service and giving quality feedback on the quality of service on offer and the points of failure in the whole delivery process. However getting and maintaining knowledgeable staff is costly and the restaurant must be prepared to invest. Another way of dealing with some of the challenges highlighted is through engaging more with clients or as the supervisor put it, 'consulting a lot with the regular customers'. This can be done through the use of customer feedback surveys, and isolating and attacking the causes of dissatisfaction. The purpose of such surveys is to understand what the customers think and feel about the service of the restaurant. Engaging customers also serves the purpose of making customers feel appreciated and important and hence are more willing to give truthful and quality feedback to help the restaurant in future.

Quality control is all about anticipation, monitoring and responding to changing situations in a timely manner and also helps managers catch errors before they become magnified. Hence the issue of service recovery is vital. A high percentage of staff (92.6%) in the restaurant are in contact with customers, and are confronted by this challenge almost on a daily basis. For more successful service recovery, employees need to be empowered to handle any defects when they occur. The challenge of unavailability of all staff on all training days can be addressed by retaining all staff, whether on duty or not, on certain days for training. The training goes hand in hand with the regular meetings held by other restaurants, briefings and use of fliers to pre-empt the expectations of the establishment to all. This understanding is vital since the understanding of pre-determined standards is one of the core activities in service quality control.

5. Conclusion and recommendations

Monitoring and controlling of service quality is vital for a restaurant's survival. These two processes can give the restaurant a competitive edge if well managed. However, monitoring and controlling of service quality is not as easy as when done on products. This can be explained by the nature of services which can be summed in its definition: a process consisting of a series of more or less intangible activities, takes place in interactions between the customers and service employees and/or physical resources or goods and/or systems of the service provider, which are provided as solutions to customer problems (Gronroos, 2000). Restaurants can be classified as high touch services. This basically means that the services offered are mostly dependent on people in the service process (Gronroos, 2000).

The study findings indicate that all the restaurants used in the study, carry our monitoring and controlling of service quality, though in different ways. Further, the study findings show that the control of service quality is mostly done through use of a process standards manual. According to the study findings, the most effective service quality control strategy is correction of defects while designing quality level was considered quite effective. In general, the study established that there was a control mechanism in all restaurants that deal with service quality. This system incorporates the standards operating manual. According to the managers interviewed, however, there is more reliance on supervision and verbal guidance rather than a strict written manual. Regular monitoring, verbal feedback, reinforcement, short courses on key problem areas, annual training and briefings before and after service provision and delivery are some of the ways that the management ensure employees understand pre-established standards.

A majority of staff have their work monitored by either supervisors or managers through observation or use of customer feedback. A further analysis of the staff's feedback indicated that a majority of the respondents felt that the monitoring done on their work is both efficient and effective. Most of the staff also agreed that monitoring of their work did have a positive impact on the overall quality of service on offer. Study findings indicate that monitoring of service quality is done on a daily basis by a majority of the restaurants. This monitoring is done through regular supervision. Of all the items used as indicators of service quality, sales was ranked as the most effective indicator in monitoring service quality.

The study identified presence of varied types of customers with divergent needs and expectations as the main challenges encountered during monitoring and controlling service quality in a restaurant. Other challenges include employees giving varied responses and opinions on issues of service in the restaurant when its quality is being assessed, among other challenges.

It was found that a majority of staff were not involved in the formulation of the standard process manual and a further majority were 'rarely' asked for their views on improving the working methods in their respective department. This is probably why there are challenges in the controlling service quality since the manual is the basis for the process of controlling service quality. Therefore, restaurant managers need to consult their staff while formulating the quality standards for the service production and delivery process. This will ensure that employees are in agreement, and understand what is expected of them. This involvement will also lead to a

sharing of the restaurant's quality vision by all and hence its achievement.

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