

Co-operation between Private Fitness Center and Educational Institution: a Research Based on Service Quality Assessment

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Introduction

Decision-making in an organization is oriented towards three main factors such as quality, costs and productivity that are initial indicators of activities in an organization. Today it is thought that quality of produced goods and provided services is one of the most important factors encouraging corporate competence as well as maintaining and launching new markets.

According to Palmer [1998], Kurtz, Clow [1998], service quality is an integral concept which combines concepts of service supply and consumption, technical and technological concepts as well as concepts of functional quality process and consumer satisfaction. This may be defined as a process of service quality management which, according to Parasuraman & others [1985], is important for it informs personnel about consumer needs and helps to establish service quality standards essential for consumers. Quality function deployment [Cohen, 1995] is accepted and widely applied when assessing service quality.

According to Klein, the analysis of consumers' voice guarantees the effectiveness of the quality function deployment model [1990]. When assessing service quality the consumer refers to the following characteristics: competence and skills; attitude and behavior; accessibility and flexibility; reliability, compensation, credibility [Gronroos, 1990]. Notwithstanding different responses and opinions, **SERVQUAL** service quality model is widely applied when assessing service quality [Parasuraman & others, 1985]. Service quality management covers all levels and functions in an organization. Thus, it is important for every single service providing company to develop and implement the idea of inner mission, and that every member in the company would further the development and management of service quality as well as increase service productivity. The aim of the research is to evaluate peculiarities of customer attitude towards services provided in a fitness center. The strong motivation of the club administration to conduct the research was an initial step in co-operation between private fitness center and the Lithuanian Academy of Physical Education (LAPE).

Method

The investigation took place from March throughout April 2003 in one of the most popular fitness centers in Kaunas. 300 questionnaires were handed out to regular visitor of the center, where 196 filled questionnaires were received 27 of which were partially or unduly filled.

The investigation was based on **SERVQUAL** service quality assessment model [Parasuraman & others, 1985]. The questionnaire consists of four parts. The first part presents questions on frequency of enjoyment of different services. The second part is compound of 25 statements related to service provision which were to be assessed by respondents in corresponding points. Every statement uses two seven-point scales. On the first scale a respondent had to evaluate his / her expectations related to the services. On the second scale it was asked to evaluate quality of services already used by the clients. In the third part the clients were asked to evaluate total quality of services provided by the fitness center on the seven-point scale. The last part of the questionnaire presented general questions on age and sex of the respondents. The research data has been processed applying SPSS software and the following measures have been calculated: average, standard deviation, and percentage assessment distribution.

Results and Discussion

The research results have showed that fitness center visitors aged 26-35 make almost half of the respondents. Women in the investigation were almost twice active men. The greater part of the respondent clients (51%) visits the gym 1-2 times per week and 40 % of the respondents enjoy the service 3-4 times per week. 47 % of the respondents visit aerobic training 3-4 times per week and those who enjoy this service 1-2 times per week stand not very much behind.

25 statements related to service assessment were presented in the second part. The results have revealed a clear tendency related to the fact that expectations exceed the understanding, i.e. the clients before

engaging into the fitness center activities expected services to be of higher quality. There was not much difference or disappointment observed. Mostly assessment of expectations and perception only slightly varied.

Some significant results will be discussed. Individualized attention is important to 85 % of the respondents. The value of quality received is lower than expectations. Individualized attention to each client results in their better satisfaction in regard to quality of services provided.

Thus, it may be presumed that individual attention is not of great importance for the clients, however, before coming to the club they expected to get more such attention from the staff. This criterion is a basic element of functional quality which depends upon the staff directly interacting with the client which should improve communicability, be psychologically ready to meet clients. It is important to make an impression upon the visitor that he/she could feel attention and care from the very beginning he/she enters a fitness center. It is of importance to be met, escorted, how he/she is approached, etc. This way a high level client service culture – one of the basic characteristics of a firm - is revealed. Individual attention for every single client results in greater satisfaction. Managers of the center must take it into consideration when developing staff's communicative abilities and positive attitude towards the work.

Assessment of innovation in the fitness center has revealed the fact that client expectations outreach the perception. Lack of innovations and insufficient satisfaction of clients' needs are maintained.

Application of innovations may be related to a methodology of new trainings also to completely new services, etc. Managers of the fitness center should consider modern tendencies in the sphere of fitness, also pay attention to innovations offered by the competitors. When constantly analyzing the situation it is worth updating the range of services offered, because visitors tend to link variety to higher quality of services. Innovations should not be related to great projects, because even minor alterations influence clients positively.

The adequacy between quality and price goes beyond perception in 0.85 point. In other words, after the enjoyment of services clients moved to lower assessment. Standard deviation shows that opinion of the people on this subject matter has differentiated. The research has showed that price and quality is essential material base which are very important for clients.

Since clients, when realizing a service, can not actually grope it, they pay great attention to one of the most obvious material point of reference which is service price. Namely the price may rise or lower clients' trust in a service of company. Too high a price may make an impression that it does not conform to actual service quality. When paying higher price the client expects to receive the best service. Criteria of price and quality are essential when competing with other fitness centers, because such kind of services reveals big elasticity to the price. Contemporary clients are offered a great variety of services. Thus, when trying to keep their clients, managers of the center shall not raise or lower prices accidentally. They have to be reasonable and match the quality.

Assessment of information technologies has brought a wide range of answers and distribution of opinion. Information technologies are a material aspect which contributes to the formation of corporate image; however, the clients assume that it is not really relevant to the fitness center.

One could maintain that application of IT is not important or it is absolutely unclear aspect. It is also thought that implementation of this criterion is relatively low in the fitness club. IT is one of a material symbols which contributes to the image formation. Considering the fact that application of IT to many different spheres expands, we think that fitness clubs is not an exception. For example, clients of female fitness clubs already use magnetic cards which make administration work considerably easier and are practical for the clients. When communicating with the clients e-mail may also be related to the advantages of IT.

Expectation assessment of pleasant environment surpasses perception in 0.52 point. Clients are not indifferent to the surrounding environment. It is very important to escape environmental components which bring unpleasant emotions for the clients. In this regard, the fitness center visitors are not disappointed.

When applying to the environment we bear in mind environmental conditions which directly affect human consciousness. They are stressed mostly when there is lack of certain environmental components or they cause unpleasant emotions to the clients. For example, a client may be influenced by high temperature inside, too loud music, intense light or dirt. Clients are no less influenced by exterior factors such as

interior, colours, comfort. Thus, managers of the club should attempt to create harmonious environment which would not cause dissatisfaction to the clients. As it is seen, what regards this point, clients are not disappointed and there is no need to make bigger investments.

Material aspects could cover visual appeal of equipment, convenient working hours, payment system, arrangement of equipment, installation of modern equipment, marking system, logical arrangement of equipment, neat clothing of the staff. All these material points of reference are symbols necessary to stress and determine invisible and intangible service, which assist the client in evaluating service quality.

Functional quality aspects cover all statement related to the process of service offering and staff directly communicating with the clients. This group involves such statements as “staff always ready to assist”, “implementation of promised requests”, “understanding specific needs”, “services on time”, “staff’s true concern of clients’ problems”, “available and helpful staff”, “competent staff”, “client’s notification of exact time of service rendering”.

Namely these aspects influence service quality, and managers of companies should not devalue functional quality and pay great attention to the improvement of technical quality. Improvement of functional quality should be implemented through personnel management.

Total assessment of service quality in this fitness center amounts to 5.49 points. 11 % of the respondents assessed the service quality very well, 77 % of the respondents assessed it satisfactory and only 5% of the respondents assessed the aggregate quality bad.

Thus, the level of total service quality is fairly high, however, not the highest. The following aspects are fundamental for the clients: pleasant environment, convenient opening hours, innovations, adequacy between price and quality. Lack of personal attention, application of modern equipment and information technologies is felt most of all.

We assume that while developing the strategy of corporate activities great attention should be paid to shortcomings of service quality, and constantly changing consumer needs as well as expectations should be taken into account in order to secure the consumers’ satisfaction with the services provided and their quality. Managers should pay more attention to the development of communicational skills of the staff and consolidation of its positive view upon work. The starting co-operation between the private fitness center and LAPE for research, study and social dialog purposes should be developed when arranging teaching seminars for the staff of the center and counseling employees on individual basis, etc.

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