

ANALYSING E-SERVICE QUALITY IN PROFESSIONAL SPORTS CLUBS

Author:
Torsten Schlesinger

email:
torsten.schlesinger@ispw.unibe.ch

University:
University of Berne

Faculty:
Institute of Sport Science

Abstract

Introduction

Providing various electronic services opens up a variety of lucrative marketing and sales opportunities for sports clubs. However, it is the quality of these e-services that is decisive for stabilizing existing customer relationships and generating new customer groups. Empirical studies in other branches have shown that the quality of internet service provision can be a more important success factor than, for example, lower prices (Zeithaml et al., 2002). In order to ensure that this quality is optimal, sports clubs need to develop a clear understanding of the customer's needs and preferences. Therefore, this paper pursues the following goals: (1) to develop a measurement concept for assessing the service quality of e-services of professional sports clubs; (2) to analyse the relations between e-service quality and customers responses.

Theoretical Frameworks

In sports marketing, researchers have given considerable attention to developing multidimensional factor models to capture service quality in sport clubs (e.g. De Knop et al., 2004; Shilbury, 1994). However, it is not possible to gain an adequate assessment of the quality of a sports club's e-services simply by applying these measurement models as they stand. The particular features of e-services such as the substitution of interpersonal interactions through information technology applications lead to changes in the consumer's expectations, and evaluations of service quality (Cox and Dale, 2001). The existing approaches in other service domains offer valuable starting points for the assessment of e-service quality of sports clubs. A universal approach applied across all branches is questionable, because most measurement models were developed for a specific context with its own specific basic conditions. Hence, it is essential to adapt a model for the specific context. Therefore, the five dimensions of the SERVQUAL were modified and extended to fit the special features of e-services. These suggest the integration of Internet-related aspects such as the quality of technological resources, security, and user friendliness (e.g. Bauer et al., 2004). In addition, with e-services, it is necessary to include a hedonic component that is also gaining increasing

importance in classic services in sports.

Furthermore, there is a unanimous agreement within service research that the quality of service delivery has a decisive influence on customer satisfaction and consumer loyalty across various service settings. As a result, customer satisfaction and consumer loyalty can be viewed as central variables in e-service quality.

Methodology

To assess the utility of the model developed to measure e-service quality and the postulated causal relations, an empirical study was carried out with the Swiss National-League A ice hockey club SC Berne. The study focused on the analysis of the e-service quality of the club's online merchandising shop. Data were collected from an online survey of 150 customers. According to Hinkin's (1995) recommendations regarding item-to-response ratio, this sample size is acceptable for CFA of the dimensionality of e-services quality. As all the constructs examined in the measurement model showed above-threshold values, good convergent validity (factor reliability > 0.70; AVE > 0.5) and discriminant validity is assumed. The global goodness of fit also confirmed that the developed e-service measurement model has an acceptable model fit ($\chi^2/df=2.05$; CFI=0.902; RMSEA=0.078). The postulated causal relations between e-service quality, customer satisfaction and consumer loyalty were tested by estimating the structural equation model.

Results

First, five e-service quality dimensions were identified: technological quality, functionality, enjoyment, security, and reliability. The dimension functionality has the strongest impact on the total construct 'service quality', making it the most critical dimension. Second, the results also indicate that positive evaluations of e-service quality increase customer satisfaction ($\beta=0.36$) and consumer loyalty ($\beta=0.27$) within the club-specific e-service context of an online merchandising shop. Also, there was a significant relation between customer satisfaction and consumer loyalty ($\beta=0.64$). Furthermore, the e-service quality has a positive effect on consumer loyalty through a rise in the mediator customer satisfaction (indirect effect: $0.36 \times 0.64 = 0.24$).

Discussion

This study expands the view of how to conceptualize and measure e-service quality in sports clubs. The ability to dissect the quality experience will allow managers more control and faster response to areas that are weakening the service experience. The dimensions of e-service quality can help in the evaluation of e-service quality and in the design of e-service experiences that are tailored to the customers wants and needs. Nevertheless some limitations must be acknowledged: So we recognize that the nature of the survey and the sample size provide some constraints that reduce the need to replicate the findings using different (larger) samples sizes and types of e-services in sport clubs. This in turn indicates the particular importance of replication studies within sport-related service research.

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