THE CHALLENGE OF MANAGING CUSTOMER EXPECTATIONS OF SPORT SERVICES: A THEORETICAL MODEL

Leigh Robinson, Loughborough University, United Kingdom, l.a.robinson1@lboro.ac.uk
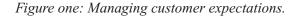
INTRODUCTION

There is a growing body of literature that seeks to apply the concepts and techniques of service quality and customer satisfaction to sport organisations (e.g. Costa, Tsitskari, Tzetzis & Goudas, 2004; de Knop, van Hoecke & de Bosscher, 2004; Papadimitriou & Karteroliotis 2000; Robinson, 1999, 2004; Theodorakis, Kambitsis, Laios & Koustelios, 2001). Review of this literature shows that research in the sport field has primarily been concerned with two aspects. The first has addressed structures and programmes for improving the service quality offered by sport organisations. The second dimension concentrates on the evaluation of service quality from a customer perspective in an attempt to measure and facilitate customer satisfaction.

Underpinning both quality improvement and customer satisfaction is the concept of customer expectations. Knowledge of what customers expect from sport organisations allows service attributes of importance to be identified. It is also necessary to understand the level of expectations that customers have for the service and its attributes as it is generally accepted that customers use their expectations of a service to determine whether the service received is of an acceptable level of quality.

However, it is apparent that customers of sport services generally expect more than they perceive they get (Robinson, 1999, 2004; Theodorakis et al, 2001). Rising expectations are problematic for providers as ultimately it may become impossible or financially unviable to raise levels of quality to meet levels of customer expectations. In an attempt to address this "vicious cycle" it is proposed that managers of sport services face the challenge of having to control and/or manage customer expectations. Figure 1 sets out a theoretical framework established from existing literature for doing this, which is discussed below.

RESULTS

Figure one: Managing customer expectations.

DISCUSSION

Influences on Customer Expectations

In order to prevent customer expectations from getting out of control, it is necessary to intervene in the development of expectations in order to prevent or to slow down their rise. This requires an understanding of how expectations are created and updated and although the process of expectation formation is not clearly understood (Coye, 2004; Robledo, 2001) a review of the service quality literature identifies the following antecedents to expectations:

Past experience: Past experience of the organisation is considered to be the main factor that shapes experience of a service. Familiarity with the service will increase the likelihood of realist expectations, although O'Neil & Palmer, (2003) have identified that prior users of a service have more complex expectations of it than those without prior use. It would appear that more detailed knowledge of a service promotes multi-faceted expectations although these may be more realistic due to experience.

Customer needs: Ojasalo (2001) considers customer needs to be the natural trigger for expectations as needs provide the reason for choosing to make use of a service. It is also suggested that the more important the need, the higher the expectation of the service.

Word of mouth (WOM): Word of mouth communications from family, friends, staff or other credible sources allows people to form an expectation of services they have yet to use. Word of mouth also acts to change or reinforce existing expectations (Bolton & Drew, 1991; Parasuraman et al, 1994).

Market communications: Advertisements, publicity material, personal selling and contracts make explicit promises to customers about the attributes of the service the organisation will deliver. Implicit promises are also made about quality, value for money, reliability and reputation through the image, branding and price communicated in market communications. As promises are antecedents to expectations (Ojasalo, 2001) customers use these promises in the formation of expectations.

Image: Clow et al (1997) found that image was an important antecedent of customer expectations and for some service organisations it was the most important influence. They argued that image allows customers to 'see and perceive' an organisation and thus has a significant impact on expectations.

Potential Interventions in the Formation of Expectations

A number of interventions in the formation of expectations can be identified in the service quality literature and these need to be used by managers to manage expectations. However, the following interventions arguably allow managers to have the greatest impact on expectations.

Quality improvement strategies: It is evident from the literature that quality improvement strategies play a significant role in influencing customer expectations that are formed by past experience. They also affect the word of mouth recommendations that shape expectations (Ojasalo, 2001; Robinson, 1999)

Customer education strategies: Described by Robledo (2001) as a consumer education programme and by Robinson (2004) as dialogue, strategies that expose customers to the realities of what can be offered will facilitate the development of realistic expectations.

By using a combination of the above strategies, managers are able to encourage the formation of realistic customer expectations.

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