

Improving service quality in the sport industry

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Aim of abstract and research question

The excessive professionalization and commercialisation of sport nowadays have resulted in the development of the sports sector as a highly competitive entertainment industry. Today, sports organizations, as entertainment providers, face a new era of global competition both inside and outside the sports industry. Sport and leisure organizations, in an effort to achieve sustainability and success, need to adopt business concepts in entrepreneurial strategies. The new business scenario requires the development and delivery of high level quality products and services that satisfy customers' needs.

The present study examines the way spectators perceive and evaluate the quality of the overall game 'experience' and provides useful managerial implications. The research questions which arise are the following:

- 1) How do spectators perceive service quality of the game experience?
- 2) How do spectators evaluate service quality of the game experience?
- 3) How can we translate the research findings into practice in the context of Greek reality?

Theoretical background

The concept of quality pre-existed years ago, from the period of ancient Greeks in the 5th century BC. Today is the most powerful competitive weapon and a key prerequisite for success and sustainability. A review of services marketing literature reveals a plethora of conceptual definitions of the quality construct. Service quality is a multidimensional concept that stimulates considerable debate in the literature about how best to conceptualize this phenomenon. Perceived service quality can be defined as 'a perceived judgement, resulting from an evaluation process where customers compare their expectations about a service and their perception of the way the service has been performed' (Grönroos, 1984).

The analysis of service quality is based on two broad conceptualizations: the European perspective and the American one. The European perspective emphasizes the basic idea of the technical quality of the outcome, the functional quality of the service encounter, and the company corporate image. The American perspective, describes service quality as a function of quality dimensions that affects the service encounter and proposes five service quality dimensions: the tangibles, the reliability, the responsiveness, the assurance and the empathy (Grönroos, 1984; Parasuraman, A., Zeithaml, V.A. and Berry, L.L. 1991). In the field of sport, another group of researchers studied the

contribution of the concept of 'serviscape' or 'sportscape' on quality perception and evaluation (Bitner, 1990; Bitner, 1992; Wakefield & Blodgett, 1994; Wakefield, Blodgett & Sloan 1996; Reiner & Kuehn, 2005).

Methodology-research design and data analysis

With regard to the present study, professional basketball has been chosen as the topic of investigation, since it has grown remarkably in recent years. After a comprehensive review of the relevant bibliography, qualitative research is conducted. A flexible exploratory research design was used as the framework for collecting and analyzing data since it provides a better understanding of service quality construct and serves the purpose of research. Given that the main aim of the research was the examination of quality factors in a sports context, a judgemental sample was used according to specific selection criteria. The method of data collection used was qualitative through semistructured interviews used as guidelines to collect the intended data from the respondents. Afterwards, selected findings were recorded, interpreted, coded, analyzed in themes and then categorized.

Results, discussion and implications

Consumers formulate their perceptions of service performance through the 'bundle of service benefits' they receive from the service experience. The main benefits spectators receive from the experience of a sporting event are entertainment, feelings, impressions and memories. Consumers do not perceive service quality in a unidimensional way, but rather they evaluate it according to multiple specific dimensions relevant to the service context. The Service quality evaluation process is considered to be a subjective and a highly complex process which is achieved according to specific mechanisms and evaluation criteria. These criteria constitute the quality indicators and the specific service quality dimensions which spectators evaluate when assessing the whole episode of the game. In the sports context, spectators evaluate the overall sports experience not only on the basis of the final outcome of the core game, but also on the basis of other aspects of service delivery process such as tangibles, people and service delivery system procedures.

Findings obtained by research showed that respondents perceive service quality according to specific dimensions; refer the game quality as the main evaluation criterion for their overall game experience, emphasize the quality of servicescape and service provision, consider the game atmosphere inextricable from the evaluation of the overall game experience, benchmark safety as the most important dimension of their final assessment of sport product quality.

From a managerial point of view, sports businesses to achieve sustainability and success in an ever-changing environment should understand how consumers evaluate, choose and use the products and services on the one hand and on the other hand, search for ways to mobilize their internal resources, plan and implement proactive win-win strategies in an integrated effort to offer a satisfactory and exciting experience and a good value for money to their customers.

Managers should face the interaction between sport organization and spectators as an exchange process in which sports executives take profit and consumers take value. The improvement of quality must be considered as a game where all participants are winners.

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