

Maintaining Service Quality Benchmarks through Green Relationships: A Marketing Strategy for Sustainable success in Restaurants

1. Dr. Shashi Nanda

A-1/602, Tower I, Purvanchal Royal Park, Sector-137, Noida, UP,
India. Pin code: 201301.

2. Dr. Romita Popli

76, Sahyog Apartment, Mayur Vihar Phase-I, New Delhi, Delhi, India.
Pin code: 110091.

3. Dr. Akanksha Jain

M-68, South City-I, Gurgaon, Haryana,
India. Pin code: 122001.

Abstract

Purpose of the research: In the contemporary competitive business scenario, offering the best of service quality to the customers, acts as an indispensable, strategic and competitive tool for the firms, that helps them in attaining sustainable growth in the long term. This conceptual paper is an attempt towards a better understanding of delivering quality services to the customers in the hospitality sector, focusing on restaurants, that promise to contribute toward sustainable success and an enduring expansion of service firms.

Methodology: The researcher has attempted to comprehend the viewpoint of various researchers that help in providing viable service quality to its customers by maximizing resource efficiency on one hand and providing customer value and satisfaction on the other.

Findings: In the era of cut-throat competition, it is imperative to gain deeper insights into customer expectations to meet quality and value standards from their perspective. A satisfied customer provides longevity in his stay with the business and refuses to adopt switching buying behaviour. In a highly dynamic and competitive business environment, the firms that can focus on the planet, people and profits are in a better position to frame feasible decisions that provide abundant service quality to their customers.

Implications: Successful firms testify a greater zeal in their customers to patronize the service provider reflecting their loyalty that paves a way in building lasting relationships. By acquiring the ability to identify the needs, differentiate the customers, interact with them personally and customize the services according to their requirements, the firms nurture a stronger competitive edge. With the help of improved and upgraded service quality, those firms who succeed to provide differentiation in services appear to be more influential than those who manage to just offer a broad range of services; furthermore, contribute towards a larger sustainable advantage, not easily replicable by the competitors. By maintaining consistency in quality and excellence in delivery, the firms endure to build, maintain and nurture healthy relationships with their dedicated customers, who remain deeply committed to providing continuous business to the service firm. A good relationship provides a strong linkage between satisfaction, trust and commitment with the loyal customers, stimulating them to witness the patronizing of the preferred services in the future, reflecting a lower likelihood of switching between brands.

Originality: Customer satisfaction, through better service quality, is an established marketing tool that encourages a customer to positively advocate the services to his family and friends and a long-term strategic decision that contributes to the sustainable development of the service firm.

Key Words: Service Quality, Customer Satisfaction, Sustainability

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I. Introduction

A service is a performance by the providers, that is primarily intangible in nature, inseparable from service providers and seekers, heterogeneous in approach, cannot be preserved and does not transfer any kind of ownership to its customers (Rushton and Carson, 1985). The services are largely associated with a physical product whose performance seems to be essentially intangible, but the end results to be necessarily visible to the

final customer. As the services are performance-based and allow the transfer of chosen benefits to the customer, it also brings along the challenge of handling the people factor (Berry, 1987).

Quality, on the other hand, is the aptitude a product/ service holds to satisfy the stated or implied needs of the final customer. The quality in the performance of a service, being the basic core offering, is closely related to customer value and satisfaction (Kotler, 2003). By adopting the strategy of providing high quality to the customers, a business can act as a quality differentiator at the marketplace and at the same time, draw a sustainable competitive advantage that helps in maintaining its economic competitiveness (Culiberg and Rojsek, 2010; Randhawa and Saluja, 2017).

Service and quality, the two terms taken together, is a core prerequisite for establishing service performance that essentially acts as a significant constituent in the marketing of services to gratify the consumers. Service quality is understood as “lying along a continuum ranging from ‘ideal quality’ to ‘totally unacceptable quality’ with some points along the continuum representing satisfactory quality” (Churchill et al., 1982). Service quality can also be stated as a combination of functional quality (Process) and technical quality (Output) that influences the perception of the customer to advocate the service performance (Gronroos, 1982). It is also defined as “a global judgment or attitude relating to the overall excellence or superiority of the service” (Parasuraman, 1988). Other authors mentioned that service quality is the “extent to which a service meets customer’s needs or expectations” (Lewis and Mitchell, 1990). The present paper holds attention to the restaurant industry’s highly dynamic and competitive business environment, where service quality has gained increased attention from restaurateurs.

Understanding Service Quality: Various Theories

The notion of service quality has become predominantly important in recent years, especially amongst academicians, researchers, and service entrepreneurs. Various views have been offered by researchers and academicians on the conceptualization and operationalization of service quality that has resulted in considerable interest and deliberation in defining and measuring the same (Wisniewski, 2001). Resultantly, different authors have defined service quality in a varied way and have built alternative scales from time to time for the measurement of service quality. It is defined as “a global judgment or attitude relating to the overall excellence or superiority of the service” (Parasuraman et al., 1988). SERVQUAL scale is an extensively accepted tool that measures and evaluates multiple items on several attributes related to a customer’s post-consumption service performance perception with his expectations. The evaluation of the expectations with performance perceptions results in comprehending the SERVQUAL gap, where a delighted customer clearly explains that there has been a positive gap, as performance perception happens to be greater than his expectations. A divergent situation occurs, when the customer is dissatisfied indicating the occurrence of a negative gap which shows that the expectations are greater than performances (Parasuraman et al., 1985).

The dimensions of the original SERVQUAL scale consisted of reliability, responsiveness, access, tangibles, competence, courtesy, communication, credibility, security, and knowing the customer (Parasuraman et al., 1985). On revisit and refinement of the scale, it was brought down to five dimensions of service quality comprised of:

- Tangibles (Appearance of a service firm’s facilities, equipment and communication materials).
- Reliability (Delivering the outputs as promised at a level already specified to the customers).
- Responsiveness (Providing speedy assistance, support and service to the customers).
- Assurance (Inspiring the trust and confidence of customers in the firms through the attitude of the employees imparting knowledge, politeness and trustworthiness).
- Empathy (Deliberating an aptitude, readiness and competence of the providers to offer personalized attention to their customers) (Parasuraman et al., 1994).

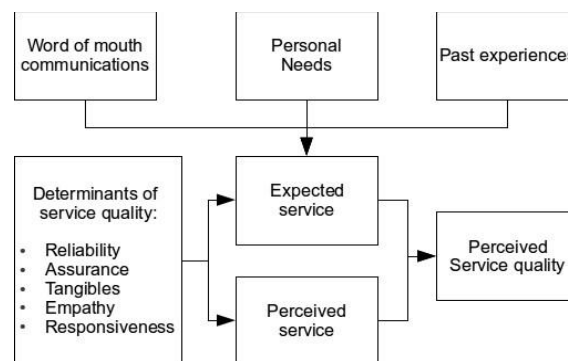


Figure 1: Determinants of Service Quality

Source: Parasuraman, Zeithaml and Berry (1994)

The American School of thought, with its generic instrument the SERVQUAL scale, has been exemplary in its conceptualization and operationalization, which is capable of measuring the degree and discrepancy of consumer's expectations and perception. Being a noteworthy landmark in the literature of service quality, it is adapted in its original or modified form from time to time, across different sectors. Yet it has its part of disapproval too, i.e., 'the technical quality' (output) aspect, on the whole, has been ignored and the focus is laid only at 'the functional quality' (process) that does not help generate and retain customers; as both the factors are considerably significant in shaping the customer's patronage over a period of time.

The Nordic/ European School of thought, contested the Parasuraman's SERVQUAL model, by incorporating the 'what' part of service delivery, a vital constituent that measures the final output of services delivered to the customers (Gronroos, 1982). Both the constructs, i.e., the technical quality that denotes 'what is delivered' (outcome of service performance), and the functional quality that denotes 'how the end result is delivered' (the process of service delivery) have been included to shape the customer's perspective of quality (Lehtinen and Lehtinen, 1982; Gronroos, 1984).

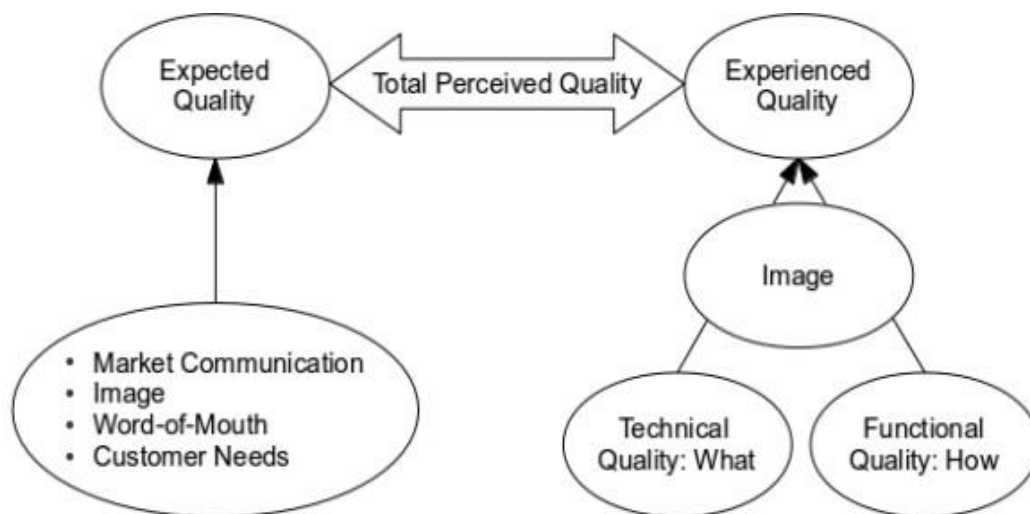


Figure 2: Service Quality Model
Source: Gronroos (1990)

A few years later, another novel and the promising dimension of service quality, i.e., 'image' seemed to look impressive around understanding the customer's perception about the supplier. The 'image' component helps the customers in establishing the expected service quality from its providers. It is observed that a favourable image provides greater strength, goodwill and benefits to the firm as customers are usually inspired to overlook the minor gaps in the service delivery. On the contrary, a negative image inspires the consumer to comprehend the slighted lapses in a magnificent manner (Gronroos, 1990). In addition, corporate advertising, word of mouth communications and past experiences, help in influencing the expected service quality that in turn, helps in establishing the image/corporate quality of a firm. In the later studies, some authors were convinced to propose, the 'image' component as a mediating factor rather than an independent component, as it requires largely the support of both the functional traits and the technical excellence in building the service quality construct (Kang and James, 2004).

SERVPERF model is another popular contribution in the area of service quality that has drawn considerable attention from scholars and academicians. The said tool assesses the perception of performances only assuming that the respondents rate their experiences by comparing performance perceptions with the corresponding performance expectations; an attempt to measure expectations directly is not required. The arrangement of enquiring scores for performance items only, in a way, warrants the operationalization of SERVQUAL only in the context of respondent's expectation rather than questioning these independently to measure the gap. The tool is dynamic, reliable and statistically acceptable as it contributes in the reduction of the methodological problems related to its measurement (Cronin and Taylor, 1992).

The electronic service quality is the newest paradigm that can be understood through S-QUAL (e-core service quality scale), a 22-item scale with 4 dimensions and E-RecS-QUAL (e-recovery service quality scale), an 11-item scale with 3 dimensions (Parasuraman et al., 2005). The interaction and experience of a customer during his visit to a website showcases his purchase decisions and spending patterns. As part of customer's perception, the significant factors that enable customers to evaluate the criteria of the online services include Access, Site aesthetics, Ease of navigation, Security/privacy, Reliability, Responsiveness, Flexibility, Efficiency, Assurance/trust, Price knowledge and Customization/personalization (Parasuraman et al., 2005). A positive

experience with a website, during and after the services are provided, most likely depends on the timely delivery of appropriate online products and services.

By laying focus on deliberating greater perceived service quality, a service provider generates value and satisfaction for its customers. The conceptualization and operationalization of some of the service quality models have been discussed in the current paper, which brings about enhanced market share, high revenues and a dependable customer clientele.

Service Quality: Portrayal of long-term Strategic Decisions

It is a well-understood fact that a service provider can draw a sustainable advantage in the marketplace through the execution of productive and profitable operations, by being pleasant, polite, skilled, experienced, competent, well-informed, empathic and helpful in delivering services to the consumers. By acquiring the skill of identifying the customer's needs, interacting with them personally and providing differentiated/customized services in accordance with their requirements, a marketer is able to develop a stronger competitive edge at the ever dynamic and competitive market place. A customer-focused approach act as a long-term strategic decision that portrays the commencement of quality with needs/ requirements and finishes with the delivery/ satisfaction of the customer (Kotler, 2003).

By offering a wide range of services is no longer a persuasive weapon as this kind of differentiation strategy can be easily replicated by the competitors. To induce a sustainable advantage, a service provider has to deliberate on the execution of the quality dimensions of the services, which is somewhat more difficult to duplicate. The 'how' part holds an advantageous position over and above the 'what' part of services in building the business. An expressive distinctiveness can be observed through the delivery of actual service quality, rather than the varied range of assorted services, offered to the customers, that undoubtedly provides satisfaction, but by no means become the main driver (Culiberg et al., 2010). An exceptional care to provide genuine service quality is assumed to be within the complete control and jurisdiction of the service providers, which is developed as a strategically planned competitive tool, used by them to attract, maintain and grow customers (Padma et al., 2009). As an important pillar of marketing, service quality influences and contributes towards achieving a level of customer satisfaction that positively advocates their loyalty and repurchase intention. A positive buying behaviour amongst the consumers advocates the long run viability of the service firms.

Service Quality in Food Service Operations

A restaurateur provides food-related services that are essentially tied up to a tangible product, where a restaurateur's performance is necessarily intangible. It is presumably a stimulating task for the service providers to connect with the human factor and provide standardized/uniform services to them. A consumer deliberates to evaluate several service-related attributes that he encounters in the process of consuming services. Furthermore, the post-consumption evaluations about the superiority of the services enable consumers to comprehend differentiable service quality more effectively. In the light of the present study, distinguishing service quality is understood to act as an attractive perspective for excellence in performance in the restaurant industry. Consequently, numerous models of food services help in the assessment and appraisal of service quality in restaurants that help in the measurement of service delivery and service outcome. The various DINESERV models were introduced to highlight the basic service offerings in the restaurant settings that help in assessing guest's dining experience to evaluate customer satisfaction and delight. The DINESERV scale, proposed by Stevens et al., 1995, comprised of the five dimensions, viz., tangibles, responsiveness, reliability, assurance and empathy, which adapted from Parasuraman's SERVQUAL, that largely focused on physical design and decor, the appearance of staff, personalized attention, restaurant cleanliness, freshness/temperature of food, error-free ordered food and accurate billing. The final version of the DINESERV scale included 29 statements, measured on a seven-point Likert scale for customer's response. Another compatible index, the Expanded DINESERV scale, suggested by Wu et al., 1999, included 38 attributes, with mainly four dimensions of the service quality activities, viz., Product/Service, Greeter, Physical Environment and Reliability. Furthermore, the Modified DINESERV model, proposed by Andaleeb and Conway, 2006, included seven dimensions and 35 attributes for measuring service quality in restaurants with Price and Customer Satisfaction, as additional dimensions to Steven's DINESERV model. The enumerated scales were acknowledged by academicians and researchers as dependable in measuring effective service quality that prevents the patron's switching buying behaviour.

Service Quality: Deliberating Success through Green Relationships

The notion to protect the environment and maintain ecological balance, the essence of green restaurants lies in the utilization of minimal natural resources. These restaurants administer their operations by bestowing greater importance to the 2 E's, viz., Energy and Efficiency and 3 R's, viz., Reduce, Reuse, and Recycle to sustain development (Gilg, Barr and Ford, 2005). To cut down the negative effect on the environment and

confer an improvement in the quality of living standard, the green restaurants are sustaining and maintaining the ecological perspective in assessing the effectiveness of service quality. Environmental protection, being the need of the hour, provides a direction to the service providers to contribute towards the reduction in damage to the environment by following green practices in service organisations, mainly by offering eco-friendly and healthy green products to its customers (Peattie and Ratnayaka, 1992; Azad and Laheri, 2014). The green perspective adopted in applying service quality dimensions to the restaurants promotes a positive buying intention amongst the customers. The GR SERV tool contributes to effectively comprehending the performance of the quality of services in green restaurants (Chen, Cheng and Hsu, 2015). The dimensions of the GR SERV tool comprise of Tangibility, Reliability, Responsiveness, Assurance, Empathy, Environmental-oriented services and Food quality. The green restaurants offer green foods on their menu lists, viz., organic, sustainable and local food, and incorporate green practices in the delivery of services to help maintain the ecological balance in the environment. According to the regulations of the Green Restaurant Association (GRA, 2007), the key areas of green practices comprise of the three elements, viz., Green Action, Green Foods and Green Donation. Further, the Green Restaurant Association (GRA, 2012), drew attention to the key areas of green practices comprise of seven elements, viz., water efficiency, sustainable food, sustainable furnishings, sustainable building materials, waste reduction/ recycling, use of energy-saving equipment and pollution reduction. Adopting green practices, though a challenging task helps protect the environment most finely.

Sustainable Service Quality: A Competitive Advantage

An analysis and evaluation of service quality dimensions and assessing their relative importance helps in selecting the right service provider (Jain and Jain, 2015). Any kind of uncertainty in service delivery and unexpected service failure, in form of delayed deliveries, low performance, incompetent staff, unskilled personnel, complex techniques, awkward service hours, complicated bill errors, erroneous bank statements, are largely accompanied by a possibility of generating undesirable outcomes that may damage the firm's image in the long term (Lovelock, 2007). It is the responsibility of the service provider to minimize the anxieties of the customer and pay special emphasis on the ecological perspective of the service quality dimensions to promote positive buying intentions (Gummesson 1994; Padma et al., 2009). A well-defined and delivered service quality is a critical success factor for the firms to retain their existing customers and attract potential customers. Understanding the needs and expectations of the target audience and satisfying them will bring about a greater market share and profitability for the firm by way of maintaining their existing customer base (Athanasopoulou, 2009). A service provider, who adopts the customer-oriented approach of service quality in meeting their needs/preferences at the marketplace through the delivery of improved and upgraded service quality, as a strategic choice rather than an option, is likely to observe quantifiable rewards in terms of cost reductions, enriched revenues and large market share (Anderson et al., 1994; Nkamnebe, 2011). Past studies indicate that it is within the control of the service providers to enhance customer value, leading to their satisfaction. It is to be understood that customer satisfaction is a substantial aspect of consumer behaviour, exhibited as their fulfillment response or perceived pleasurable level on the consumption of services (Oliver, 1997). A satisfied customer tends to bring more business for the firm, who himself remains loyal in the long run, by depicting his behavioral intention to repurchase and also advocates spreading a positive word of mouth to family/friends (Zairi, 2000).

Ordinarily, the notion holds, that the level of quality of services determines the level of satisfaction of the customer. The higher the level of one, the greater is the expectation of the level of the other, hence increased service quality is more likely to result in satisfied customers and vice- a- versa (Ladhari, 2009). Service quality, being one of the strongest pillars of service marketing and a competitive tool in the hands of the providers, tends to attract, maintain and grow customers. Organisations are consistently trying to offer competitively, the best service quality to them which has proved it to be a necessary ingredient in persuading customers to prefer choosing one organization over the other (Kandampully and Duddy, 1999). Perhaps, by undertaking the charge of providing a high quality of services, a marketer conforms to customer expectations consistently and maintains a level of competitiveness amongst firms. Furthermore, by creating environmental awareness amongst the consumers, maintaining green relationships with the society at large and adopting the norm of sustainability reporting, the firms contribute to the long-run stability of the economy (Gummesson 1999; Martinez and Martinez, 2010; Aggarwal, 2013).

In a highly competitive business environment, generating and maintaining a loyal customer base is a challenging task that requires a good quantity of time, money and effort. The market performers, superior to their rivals possibly hold something exceptionally distinct that is difficult to replicate that permits them to outperform (Bharadwaj et al., 1993). Staying ahead of competitors requires an effective operationalization of service quality constructs that act as a critical success factor to influence the competitiveness of a service firm (Akhtar, 2011). The competitive advantage for a service provider does not rest upon a wider range of services being offered to the customers, but on 'how' the services are offered/ delivered. The broad range of services

positively influences customer perception and satisfaction, however in a practical situation, never acts as the main driving force and by no means could be a strategic approach of differentiation, as competitors can easily reproduce the same (Culiberg, 2010). A meaningful distinctiveness at the marketplace can largely be witnessed through the quality of services offered, that help in benefiting the service provider. It is more viable to focus on the service quality dimensions that refer to the process/ technique of service delivery, which is not easy to duplicate by others and hence increase sustainable growth (Holbrook, 1994). To enhance the growth of service firms, it is the continuing responsibility of the service providers to constantly monitor the customer-oriented view of service quality and business-oriented view of values-based sustainability. A model of values-based service quality for sustainable service business discusses the various service quality concepts, functions and dimensions, along with the concept of values understood and communicated by employees (Enquist, et al., 2007).

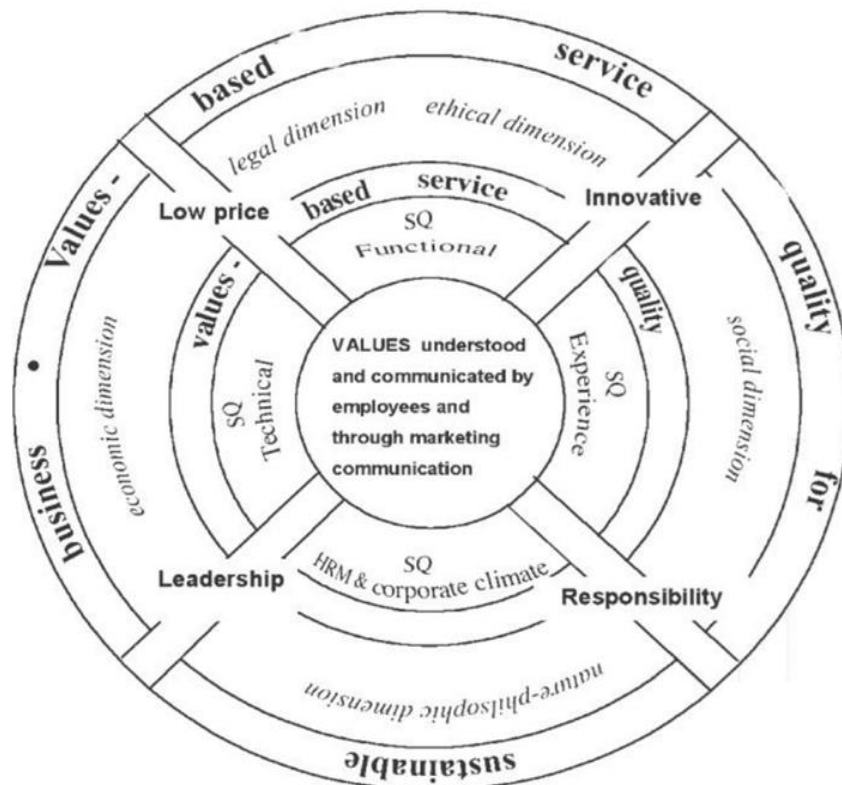


Figure 3: A model of values-based service quality for sustainable service business
 Source: Enquist, Edvardsson&Sebhatu (2007)

It is imperative to regularly observe and monitor the services, their dimensions and the outcome quality, keeping the customer’s perspective in mind to align successfully with their ever-demanding attitude (Gronroos, 1984). To build a long-lasting successful customer relationship, the organisations are trying to offer competitively, the best service quality to their customers (Gupta, 2010). Remarkably, the service quality acts as the strongest pillar of service marketing, that determines the success or failure of the firms, paving the way to desirable business outcomes, in form of its existence, growth, market share and profitability, without any additional advertising cost (Zeithaml and Bitner, 2000). By nourishing uniformity in superior quality and delivering the same in an excellent form, customers endorse a less likelihood of switching brands and continue to patronize the firm by providing repeat business (Nanda and Khandai, 2017). An entrepreneur who ensures to focus on the needs and desires of the customers, both non-verbalized and unstated needs, gain a better competitive edge by linking service quality with handling customer’s problems (Edvardsson, 1998; Kotler, 2003).

Customer Value and Satisfaction: A Pathway to be Socially Responsible

As a vital constituent of consumer behaviour, the notion of customer value is ordinarily understood as the deviation between the benefits drawn and costs incurred by the customers. In other words, it is a trade-off between the relevant ‘give’ and ‘get’, built on the total evaluation of the utility acquired as amongst the

perception of what is surrendered (time, money, effort) for what is attained (quality, volume, convenience) (Zeithaml, 1988). A consumer is unlikely to enter into a transaction unless he perceives the 'gets' to be closely equal to or more than the 'gives' (Jain and Jain, 2015). The "value" component must be defined and co-created with the customers and not just embedded in the notion of final service/output offered by the providers. An increased understanding of the nature and significance of value helps in contributing towards a more meaningful awareness of green and environmental issues that provides greater satisfaction to the customers (Vargo and Lusch, 2004).

Amongst the others, customer satisfaction is another noteworthy constituent of consumer behaviour, which acts as the very foundation for any entrepreneur to stay in business. It is usually understood as the post-purchase appraisal of goods and services which can easily be compared with the pre-purchase expectations (Kotler, 2003). The perceived service quality as a form of consumer attitude of the long-run appraisal of one's overall experience significantly contributes to determine the level of customer satisfaction (Bitner, 1990; Bolton and Drew, 1991; Parasuraman et al., 1988). The greater the level of perceived service quality, the higher is the level of positive customer attitudes and behavioural intentions (Parasuraman et al., 1985; Joyner and Payne, 2002).

To meet the increasing demands of the customers, firms focus on providing quality perceptions, along with maintaining their corporate sustainable responsibility (Ozbekler and Ozturkoglu, 2020). By providing enhanced and upgraded service quality, a visionary service provider preserves a level of competitiveness in satisfying its customers. Adopting a social perspective in providing better service quality acts as a popular marketing tool and a long-term strategic decision that help retain the customers who patronize the services themselves and at the same time, advocate their healthy service experience to friends/peers. The firms that develop green products/ processes contribute to minimizing the negative environmental effect and help in achieving socially responsible goals, though at the same time, it is contended that the fundamental incentive for such action remains economically inspired (Choi and Parsa, 2006). In other words, the phenomenon of sustainable development by adopting Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) and integrating a viable and ecological environmental stratum, paves a way towards resultant quantifiable benefits in form of revenues, cost reductions and increased market share (Anderson et al., 1994; Enquist et al., 2006).

Service Quality Shortfalls and Remedies

In the context of the hospitality sector, especially the restaurants, where services play a vital role, along with the quality of food served to the customers, the buyers many a time, face a considerable ambiguity in service delivery that may arise due to the factors associated with the services, that includes intangibility, complexity, heterogeneity, simultaneity, lack of service knowledge, perishability and long service delivery horizon. The unexpected service failures hold a probable likelihood to generate uncertainty and negative outcomes. It is the responsibility of the restaurateur to focus at the needs and wants of the customer and understanding the customer's experience with the service provider, to help them reduce the anxieties, worries and unfavorable purchasing motives (Padma et al., 2009). It is a requisite for the firms to maintain their goodwill and evade, as far as possible, the repeat shortfalls in service quality. It is also imperative to identify the causes of service failures which may help them take precautionary and remedial measures in the future.

II. Conclusions

The competitive environment at the marketplace offers a paradigm shift from services acquired by customers to services experienced by them endorsing an upgraded quality of service delivery. In the course of retaining the existing satisfied customer base, the service firms emphasize the proficiency of their employees in delivering services, collecting feedback and resolving conflicts. The indispensable component of offering service quality combined with the promising tendency to follow green practices vitally contributes to the sustainability of the service firms in the long run. The thought-provoking 'go green' moves, viz., applying innovative techniques of sustainable use of scarce natural resources, using recycled waste material, using efficient tools concerning energy-boosting and subsiding carbon emissions, contributes toward the reduction of the negative influence on the environment. By adopting a sincere and reasonable approach in designing, maintaining and improving the service quality, the firms can contribute towards incorporating a high spirit of satisfaction amongst their customers.

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