

Quality Management And Its Applicability As A Management Tool For Customer Satisfaction In The Service Sector

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Abstract:

The aim of this research was to analyse quality management in the service sector in order to clarify how quality management can be implemented to guarantee customer satisfaction and excellence in service provision, taking into account the peculiar characteristics of services compared to tangible products. To this end, bibliographical research was carried out by searching for articles in databases such as SciELO, Scopus, Web of Science and Google Scholar, as well as institutional repositories. During the search, specific keywords were used in association with Boolean operators AND and OR. The analysis of quality management in the service sector showed that the application of specific practices is crucial to meeting the challenges inherent in this sector, with the aim of guaranteeing customer satisfaction and operational excellence. The research addressed the intangibility of services, emphasising the need to create tangible evidence of quality through communication and visual materials, to help customers evaluate the service before purchase. Variability was also discussed, highlighting the importance of standardising processes and implementing technology and continuous training to reduce differences in the quality of the service provided. The perishability of services, with their dynamic nature and impossibility of storage, was addressed with a focus on adaptive strategies, such as capacity management and the use of technologies to adjust demand, including reservation systems and price flexibility. Inseparability, meanwhile, highlighted the importance of interaction between provider and customer, highlighting the need for effective staff training and the adoption of technologies for personalisation and queue management. Therefore, adopting an integrated approach, which takes into account the unique characteristics of services and adopts adapted practices, is essential for improving perceived quality, strengthening companies' competitiveness and ensuring their long-term sustainability.

Keywords: *Management; Quality; Services.*

Date of Submission: 09-09-2024

Date of Acceptance: 19-09-2024

I. Introduction

Quality management refers to the set of coordinated activities to direct and control an organisation with the aim of ensuring that its products or services meet and exceed customer expectations. Thus, quality management involves planning, implementing and controlling processes and systems that ensure consistency, efficiency and continuous improvement. It is based on principles such as customer satisfaction, effective leadership, the involvement of people and evidence-based decision-making. Through methods and tools such as data analysis, audits and continuous feedback, organisations seek not only to correct faults and prevent problems, but also to promote a culture of excellence that drives innovation and adaptability (Paladini, 2019).

Historically, quality management began to gain prominence with the Industrial Revolution, when mass production and the standardisation of processes became essential to guarantee consistency and efficiency in the manufacture of goods. However, the focus was largely on the production of tangible products, and the application of quality concepts was less developed in the service sector. It wasn't until the second half of the 20th century, with the growth of the service sector and the increasing importance of customer satisfaction, that quality management began to expand beyond manufacturing. Pioneers such as W. Edwards Deming and Joseph Juran, who initially focused on industry, began to apply their principles of quality control and improvement to various

sectors, including services, highlighting the importance of quality management in intangible contexts as well (Ishida; Oliveira, 2019).

In the 1980s, with globalisation and intensified competition, service companies began to recognise the need to adopt systematic quality management practices in order to remain competitive. The introduction of standards such as ISO 9000 and the growing emphasis on models of excellence, such as the Total Quality Management (TQM) Excellence Model, brought a new perspective to quality management in services. This period marked a transition, with companies beginning to adopt more structured approaches to measuring and managing service quality, focusing not only on efficiency but also on customer experience and innovation (Galdino et al., 2016).

The concept of quality management in the service sector covers the execution of tasks and ensuring that all processes are aligned with customer expectations and best market practices. This is because the intangible nature of services requires companies to develop specific methods for measuring and managing quality. Because of this, quality management in the service sector requires the continuous training and development of employees, who play a key role in delivering services and creating value for the customer. Quality management strategies must therefore focus not only on process efficiency, but also on training and motivating staff to ensure that the service delivered is consistent and of high quality (Pereira; Pacheco; Pedro Filho, 2021).

Furthermore, quality management in the service sector is intrinsically linked to customer experience management. Customer satisfaction is not just a question of delivering the service as promised, but of exceeding expectations and creating memorable experiences. Companies need to adopt proactive approaches to understanding customer needs and preferences, using continuous feedback to adjust and improve their services. Techniques such as satisfaction surveys, monitoring performance indicators and analysing feedback are essential tools for identifying areas for improvement and implementing changes that increase perceived quality (Lima-Filho et al., 2020).

The aim of this research was therefore to analyse quality management in the service sector in order to clarify how quality management can be implemented to guarantee customer satisfaction and excellence in service provision, taking into account the peculiar characteristics of services compared to tangible products.

The justification for carrying out this research lies in the importance of quality in the service sector, which has become a competitive differentiator in a globalised and competitive market. As consumers become more demanding and expectations of services increase, organisations need to implement quality management practices to guarantee customer satisfaction and loyalty. In addition, the growing complexity of services and the need to adapt quickly to changes in the market demand an in-depth understanding of best practices and quality management strategies. Therefore, investigating and understanding how service companies can improve their processes, enhance the customer experience and achieve operational excellence is essential to ensure their long-term success and sustainability.

II. Methodology

To carry out this research, a bibliographical methodological approach was adopted, with the aim of exploring and analysing quality management in the service sector. The search for articles was conducted in various academic databases, including SciELO, Scopus, Web of Science and Google Scholar, as well as institutional repositories.

During the search process, specific keywords were used to ensure the relevance and accuracy of the results obtained. The keywords used included "quality management", "service sector", "customer experience", "continuous improvement" and "customer satisfaction". Boolean operators such as AND and OR were used to refine the results and broaden the scope of the research.

The AND operator was used to combine different concepts, ensuring that the articles retrieved included all the terms, as in "quality management AND service sector". The OR operator was used to include synonyms or related terms, as in "customer experience OR customer satisfaction".

The data was analysed qualitatively, focusing on reading and interpreting the selected works. Each article and source was examined to identify key concepts, methodologies employed and the main conclusions relating to quality management in the service sector. From these readings, information was extracted and organised to provide an understanding of the topic, making it possible to identify the practices and challenges associated with quality management in the context of services.

III. Results And Data Analysis

Historical overview of the concept of quality

The concept of quality has undergone countless changes over time, gaining prominence especially in the post-war scenario. At the end of the Second World War, Japan entered a period of economic recession due to the destruction caused by the bombing of Hiroshima and Nagasaki. As a result, the country suffered severe physical and human damage during the war, and most of its infrastructure was destroyed. In addition, the country also lost

its colonies and, consequently, industries that depended on raw materials, such as minerals and oil, were at a great disadvantage compared to competitors from other countries (Ishida; Oliveira, 2019).

In the 1970s, the Japanese managed to strengthen their economy by using total quality as a competitive advantage and, since then, the concept of quality has been widely debated in various fields of knowledge due to its importance. These concepts were introduced to Japan by the American W. Edwards Deming, who taught Japanese leaders the importance of quality management. Thus, instead of concentrating solely on mass production, Japanese companies began to focus on reducing waste, increasing efficiency and improving product quality (Tofoli, 2007).

Quality concepts have helped Japanese companies to increase efficiency and product quality, as well as reducing waste and production costs through the adoption of *just-in-time* and *Kaizen* methods. This has allowed Japanese companies to compete successfully in global markets and become leaders in sectors such as electronics, automobiles and technology. In addition, the Japanese government encouraged the adoption of these total quality concepts by providing financial support and training for companies. The government also created a corporate culture that valued innovation, quality and continuous improvement (Sacramento; Didini; Nascimento, 2021).

According to Paladini (2019, p. 23), "when the term Total Quality Management is mentioned, we actually want to remember that there is a new management model, based on a new concept of quality". The purpose of this new management model is to set targets for achieving organisational objectives, in order to find ways for companies to operate in a market characterised by intense competitiveness. The aim of total quality is to offer organisations the means to gain a competitive advantage over the competition, as well as a relationship of trust and satisfaction with consumers and suppliers.

In this way, Total Quality is a management concept that seeks the continuous improvement of an organisation's processes and products, with the aim of fully satisfying customer needs and expectations. The constant and intensive practice of the concepts of quality and total quality leads to improvements in productivity and, consequently, guarantees the survival of organisations in the market. For these concepts to be applied effectively within the corporate sphere, it is necessary for everyone in the organisation to be involved in quality management (Zahaikevitch et al., 2019).

According to Garvin (2002), quality was initially seen as being linked to the standardisation of goods and/or services. However, this perspective has become obsolete and, nowadays, the focus has shifted to strategic quality management, with the main concern being consumer satisfaction. Tofoli (2007) emphasises that quality is first and foremost the result of a perception inherent in the cultural functions of a given group. As such, it is a broad concept that can be found in companies, production systems, costs and other spheres of society.

Although the term quality has several meanings, Galdino et al. (2016) describe quality as a property, attribute or condition inherent to things or people, which distinguishes them and defines their essence. In the context of a value scale, it is quality that allows people to evaluate and consequently approve, accept or reject something based on its merits. Quality can therefore be defined as the absence of defects that enable customers to buy the services and/or products on offer again.

Characteristics of the services

Services have specific characteristics that distinguish them from tangible goods, and these are important for understanding how services work and for drawing up marketing strategies. Therefore, as well as discussing the definitions and approaches to services, it is essential to analyse their main characteristics, which are: intangibility, variability, perishability and inseparability (Zeithaml; Bitner; Gremler, 2014).

Intangibility

Intangibility is one of the main characteristics of services and refers to the fact that they cannot be seen, touched or experienced before they are purchased. Intangibility represents a challenge for companies offering services, as it makes it difficult to create tangible elements that can be used to convey trust and credibility to customers (Zeithaml; Bitner; Gremler, 2014; Fitzsimmons; Fitzsimmons, 2014).

According to Zeithaml, Bitner and Gremler (2014), intangibility is one of the characteristics that makes services more difficult for customers to evaluate before purchasing them. This can generate uncertainty and doubt in customers, which can lead to a lower willingness to purchase the service. To deal with this characteristic, companies need to create tangible elements that can be used as quality indicators, such as the appearance of employees, the appearance of the physical environment and product packaging.

Based on these aspects, it is essential that companies take care to create tangible elements that can be used as quality indicators for their services. These elements can be used by customers as criteria to assess the quality of the service and make informed purchasing decisions, thus contributing to customer loyalty and building a positive image of the company in the market (Zeithaml; Bitner; Gremler, 2014).

In addition, Kahtalian (2012) points out that intangibility also makes services more difficult to standardise and control. As services are produced by people, they are subject to variations in quality depending

on factors such as the competence of the service provider, the mood of the customer, among others. This is why companies need to invest in employee training and capacity building to ensure consistency in the quality of the service provided.

In addition, intangibility can be used as an opportunity for companies to offer personalised experiences tailored to customer needs and preferences. In this respect, intangibility can be seen as a competitive advantage, as it allows companies to create experiences that could not be offered through tangible goods (Amorim, 2019).

In light of the above, Ferreira and Oliveira (2020) emphasise that intangibility can be used as an opportunity for companies to offer personalised experiences tailored to customer needs and preferences. This is because services are generally more flexible and adaptable than tangible goods, allowing companies to offer more customised experiences tailored to each customer.

Variability

Variability is one of the unique characteristics of services that can affect the quality of the service provided, and represents a challenge for companies that offer services. Thus, variability is perceived due to various factors, such as the skill of the service provider, the mood of the customer, demand, among others, which can influence the customer's perception of service quality (Zeithaml; Bitner; Gremler, 2014).

In the view of Zeithaml, Bitner and Gremler (2014), variability is one of the main characteristics of services and requires companies to adopt measures to guarantee the quality of the service provided. The services most affected by this characteristic are those that involve direct interaction between the service provider and the customer, such as customer service, health services and consultancy services.

In order to deal with variability, companies must invest in employee training and qualification, ensuring that they have the necessary skills and competences to consistently offer a quality service. Furthermore, companies can use technology to standardise and control service delivery processes, minimising variability and guaranteeing the quality of the service provided (Paraskevas; Buhalis, 2002).

Technology is an important tool for companies in managing service variability, as it allows them to standardise and control service processes, minimising variability and guaranteeing the quality of the service provided. In this case, the use of technological tools in the management of variability includes the automation of processes, the adoption of integrated management systems, the training and qualification of employees and customer feedback (Zeithaml; Bitner; Gremler, 2014; Fitzsimmons; Fitzsimmons, 2014; Paraskevas; Buhalis, 2002).

Table 1. Elements needed to use technology to manage service variability

<p>- <u>Process automation</u>: process automation can be used to standardise the execution of tasks and minimise variability in the provision of services. For example, a telecommunications company can use automated systems to record customer service requests and direct them to the responsible sectors, minimising communication errors and ensuring that requests are dealt with quickly and efficiently.</p>
<p>- <u>Adoption of integrated management systems</u>: integrated management systems allow companies to efficiently manage all the information related to the provision of services, from customer service to invoicing and payment. These systems allow information to be shared between the company's sectors, minimising errors and rework and guaranteeing the quality of the service provided.</p>
<p>- <u>Training and qualification</u>: Technology can also be used to train and qualify employees, ensuring that they have the necessary knowledge to carry out their tasks in a standardised and efficient manner. For example, a company can use online courses to train employees in service procedures and standards, minimising variability in the execution of tasks and guaranteeing the quality of the service provided.</p>
<p>- <u>Customer feedback</u>: Companies can also use technology to collect customer feedback and monitor the quality of the services provided. For example, a company can use an online survey system to collect information on customer satisfaction with the services provided, identifying opportunities for improvement and minimising variability in service provision.</p>

Source: Zeithaml, Bitner and Gremler (2014); Fitzsimmons and Fitzsimmons (2014) and Paraskevas and Buhalis (2002).

In view of the above, it can be seen that technology can be a powerful tool for companies in managing service variability, making it possible to standardise and control service processes, minimising variability and guaranteeing the quality of the service provided. However, it is important to emphasise that technology must be used strategically, in conjunction with other initiatives such as employee training and capacity building and collecting customer feedback, to ensure that the company achieves its quality and customer satisfaction objectives.

Variability can be, according to Zeithaml, Bitner and Gremler (2014), an opportunity for companies to offer personalised experiences tailored to customer needs and preferences. Companies can use this characteristic to create exclusive and differentiated services compared to those offered by competitors. By identifying customer

preferences and needs in each interaction, companies can offer personalised and tailored services that meet people's individual expectations and needs.

To summarise, variability is an important characteristic of services that can affect the quality of the service provided and represents a challenge for companies that offer services. To deal with this characteristic, companies need to invest in employee training and skills, use technology to standardise and control service processes, and take advantage of variability as an opportunity to offer personalised and differentiated services.

Perishability

According to Zeithaml, Bitner and Gremler (2014), one of the fundamental characteristics of services is perishability, which refers to the limitation of the supply of services in time and space. Therefore, unlike tangible products that can be stored and used later, services must be provided at the moment of demand. Perishability therefore presents significant challenges for companies offering services, since demand can exceed capacity at certain times, creating a window of opportunity for competitors.

Perishability is a unique characteristic of services and can limit the supply of services at certain times, which can lead to customer dissatisfaction and loss of business. For example, in a restaurant, the capacity to serve customers is limited by the number of tables available and the time it takes each customer to finish their meal. If demand exceeds service capacity, customers may have to wait for a table or choose another restaurant (Kathalian, 2012).

To manage perishability, Kotler, Hayes and Bloom (2002) point out that companies can adopt a variety of strategies, such as the use of reservations, flexible pricing at different times and on different days, the adoption of technologies that allow real-time monitoring of demand and service capacity, among others. These strategies can help companies optimise the use of their service capacity and meet demand efficiently and effectively.

Companies can also look for ways to extend their service offering, such as using online resources to offer services that are not limited by space or time. This strategy can help companies overcome perishability and increase their service capacity. Offering exclusive, high-quality services can also be a way of creating demand that exceeds service capacity, which can lead to higher prices and greater value perceived by customers (Soares et al, 2022).

As such, perishability is a fundamental characteristic of services, which presents significant challenges for companies offering services. To manage perishability, companies can adopt different strategies, such as the use of reservations and technologies that allow real-time monitoring of demand and service capacity. Offering exclusive, high-quality services can be a way of creating demand that exceeds capacity, which can lead to higher prices and greater value perceived by customers. Understanding perishability is essential for devising effective marketing strategies in the service sector.

Inseparability

Last but not least, it is worth highlighting the characteristic of inseparability, which refers to the impossibility of separating the production of the service from its delivery. This means that services are produced and delivered at the same time, usually in direct interaction between the service provider and the customer. It is therefore one of the most important characteristics of services, as the quality of the service can be directly influenced by the interaction between the service provider and the customer (Zeithaml; Bitner; Gremler, 2014).

To understand inseparability, we need to understand, according to Lovelock, Wirtz and Hemzo (2011), that services are generally intangible, i.e. they can't be touched or seen. For this reason, direct interaction between the service provider and the customer is crucial to guaranteeing the quality of the service. As a result, inseparability makes the quality of the service dependent on the quality of the interaction between the service provider and the customer, which means that this characteristic poses significant challenges for companies offering services.

The direct interaction between the service provider and the customer can affect the customer's perception of service quality. For example, if the customer has a negative experience during their interaction with the service provider, this can affect their overall perception of service quality, even if the service itself is of high quality. At these junctures, it can be seen that service quality is strongly influenced by the service experience that the customer has during the interaction with the service provider (Lovelock; Wirtz; Hemzo, 2011).

To manage inseparability, companies can adopt different strategies, one of which is employee training to improve interaction with customers. Employee training is fundamental to ensuring that the interaction between the service provider and the customer is positive and effective, and is therefore an effective strategy for improving the quality of the interaction between the service provider and the customer. The aim of training is to prepare employees to deal with complex situations, such as customer complaints, requests and queries, in order to provide quality service (Gronroos, 2007; Paraskevas; Arendelle, 2007).

As stated by Lovelock, Wirtz and Hemzo (2011), training should be continuous and adapted to the needs of employees, with the aim of improving service quality and customer satisfaction. In this way, training can help

develop employees' interpersonal skills, improving their ability to communicate and empathise, which can lead to a more effective interaction with the customer and, consequently, a positive perception of service quality.

Another strategy is the adoption of technologies that allow the personalisation of the service based on the customer's preferences. Technology can be used to provide personalised services tailored to each customer. In addition, companies can offer self-service, which allows the customer to have more control over the interaction with the service. Queue management can also be an effective strategy for reducing customer waiting times and improving the customer experience (Fitzsimmons; Fitzsimmons, 2014).

According to Schons and Rados (2009), queue management is an important part of service management as it can directly affect the customer's perception of service quality. Queue management can be done through various strategies, such as adopting an appointment system, offering entertainment and comfort in the waiting area and communicating clearly and frequently about the estimated waiting time. In addition, it is important for companies to consider the customer's perception of fairness in the queue, i.e. whether all customers are being served in order of arrival or whether there are privileges for certain customers.

Finally, it is important to emphasise that creating a memorable and differentiated service experience can be an effective way of offsetting any negative interactions between the service provider and the customer and creating a positive perception of service quality. Companies can create a memorable and differentiated service experience by adopting a theatricality approach, in which the service is presented as a unique and engaging experience (Sampaio; Gomes; Gomes, 2017).

Quality in the service sector

Quality in services is a complex and multifaceted subject that has been addressed by various authors, so there are several perspectives on the subject. Generally speaking, quality in services can be seen as the company's ability to meet or exceed the customer's expectations in relation to the service provided, where certain peculiarities of this type of work must be taken into account, such as intangibility, heterogeneity, inseparability and perishability (Garvin, 2002).

In view of this, Gianesi and Corrêa (1996, p. 81) emphasise that "quality in services can be understood as the degree to which customers' experiences are met", thus involving a process of continuous improvement in the activities carried out by organisations. In the post-purchase process, the consumer may feel satisfied if the service has met their needs, or dissatisfied if not. At this point, opinions about the brand will be defined, which can influence other people through word-of-mouth marketing.

Based on these prerogatives, Zeithaml, Bitner and Gremler (2014) add that the key factor in providing a quality service is linked to understanding the wishes and needs of customers, since this enables a competitive advantage over the competition. Therefore, if services fall short of the expected level, consumers become frustrated and, as a result, satisfaction with the organisation plummets. Also according to the authors, five elements affect the service expected by the demanding party: transitory intensifiers, perceived alternatives, expected services, perceived service role and situational factors.

Transient intensifiers are individual and temporary factors that generally occur over a short-term period, making people more aware of their consumption needs. Perceived alternatives, on the other hand, include other existing service providers, while expected service refers to the anticipations made by customers about what they will receive. The penultimate item mentioned - perceived service role - is linked to the degree of influence that customers themselves exert over the service. Finally, it is worth highlighting situational factors, which represent "the conditions for service performance that customers perceive as underlying the service provider" (Zeithaml; Bitner; Gremler, 2014, p. 75).

In general terms, people are more likely to judge the quality of services according to work performance, i.e. taking into account the ability to carry out activities within the stipulated timeframe. In a market characterised by intense competitiveness, companies that manage to deliver what they set out to do without delays are positively recognised and, consequently, their corporate image is strengthened in the eyes of the public. In addition, labour processes become more efficient and, as a result, operating costs are reduced due to the precautions taken. Notoriously, quality assurance makes the company more competitive in the market, thus guaranteeing the continuity of the enterprise and its expansion (Gianesi; Corrêa, 1996).

Success in the service sector therefore depends on marketing strategies focussed on interpersonal relationships with clients and on providing quality work. To this end, managers must have a systemic vision in order to act in line with market changes, focusing their efforts on improving people's perception of the corporate brand and the service provided.

IV. Final Considerations

Analysing quality management in the service sector, as discussed throughout this study, revealed the importance of understanding and applying practices to meet the specific challenges of this context. The aim of the research was to clarify how quality management can be implemented in order to guarantee customer

satisfaction and excellence in the provision of services, taking into account the peculiar characteristics of services compared to tangible products.

Initially, the intangibility of services was explored, which makes prior evaluation difficult and requires companies to develop strategies to create tangible evidence of the quality offered. It was emphasised that in order to overcome intangibility, companies must invest in effective communication and the creation of physical evidence to help convey the quality of the service in a concrete way to customers.

The variability of services, in turn, highlights the need for consistency in delivery, given the influence of the different skills and conditions of service providers. The research indicated that standardisation of processes through technology and continuous training are essential to reduce variability and ensure a uniform and satisfactory experience for all customers.

Perishability, a characteristic that implies the impossibility of storing services and the need to align supply with demand in real time, was addressed with a focus on strategies such as adaptive capacity management and the implementation of technologies for monitoring and adjusting demand. The adoption of reserves and flexible pricing were highlighted as effective practices for managing perishability and optimising the use of available capacity.

Finally, the inseparability of services, which implies the simultaneity of production and delivery, emphasises the importance of interaction between provider and customer. The research revealed that employee training and the use of technologies for personalisation and queue management are crucial strategies for improving interaction and, consequently, the perception of service quality.

In conclusion, quality management in the service sector requires an integrated approach adapted to its unique characteristics. The research confirmed that understanding the peculiarities of services and implementing specific practices for each of them are fundamental to guaranteeing customer satisfaction and operational excellence. Companies that manage to align their processes and strategies with customer expectations and market demands not only improve perceived quality, but also strengthen their competitiveness and guarantee their long-term sustainability.

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