

Limitations in Customer Satisfaction Research from the Viewpoint of Benefit Delay

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Traditional customer satisfaction research basically assumes that customer satisfaction is determined by comparing customer expectations and the perceived performance of the service or goods received. It is also often said that services are produced and consumed at the same time. However, at the point of service consumption, customers are not always able to enjoy the expected benefits of the service instantaneously, referred to as "Benefit Delay". In the context of service consumption where Benefit Delay occurs, often, even when the service is unable to solve the important problems that motivated its consumption, customers tend to evaluate it as "satisfactory." Thus, customer satisfaction is not only determined by the customer's expectations of the service and what it offers but also by other factors. Moreover, although customers may indicate that they are "satisfied," the reasons for their satisfaction may be completely different.

In this paper, we attempt to address why customer satisfaction research should also take into consideration the characteristics of the service as well as a customer's tendency to avoid participation in the service delivery process. We do this by examining customer satisfaction in the consumption of services where "Benefit Delay" occurs.

Customers consume services with the expectation that they will enjoy benefits that include desired positive changes. For example, customers use restaurant services because they expect to satisfy their appetites and experience positive emotions such as fun or comfort. In this case, the customers can consume the restaurant services at the time it is produced, and at the same time enjoy the desired functional and emotional changes. We refer to such services as immediate benefit services (hereafter IBS). This is in contrast to the example of medical services. Here, patients use medical services because they expect potential recovery from a disease in their body or mind and through these services, expect to enjoy positive changes such as returning to their original health condition. However, in the case of medical service consumption, unlike restaurant services, customers do not necessarily immediately enjoy the desired change at the time of treatment. In other words, there may be a time gap between the point of consumption of the medical service and the point at which customers can actually obtain the desired changes. This time gap is the Benefit Delay. Benefit Delay occurs not only in medical service consumption but also in the consumption of educational services. We refer to these services as delayed benefit services (hereafter DBS) [1].

In the consumption of DBS, as the customer does not immediately perceive or obtain the desired positive changes from the service delivery process, the evaluation of the service will be largely based on the process quality. Such services feature two major problems. The first is the existence of uncertainty around whether or not the desired positive

changes can be obtained, and the second is the discomfort the customer may feel in participating in the service delivery process. For example, in the case of educational services, many learners will experience discomfort because they are compelled to mangle, read books that are difficult to understand, and solve esoteric problems. Because such services are generated in cooperation between the service provider and the customer, the benefits customers enjoy depend significantly on the manner in which they participate in the service delivery process. Service providers expect customers to perform some level of activity so that they can enjoy the desired positive changes, but the discomfort associated with such participation may easily restrain customer participation. For example, patients need to undergo rehabilitation, but tend to avoid it because of physical and psychological distress. As a result, such service organizations are unable to provide customers with the potential benefits and thus, customers are unable to enjoy the desired positive changes; this, thereby, might reduce customer satisfaction. Furthermore, in order to reduce the discomfort accompanying the customer participation and to improve the evaluation of the process quality, there is the risk that an undesirable service provider might appear; one that deliberately does not require the customer to participate in activities to enjoy the desired positive change. Customers may be enticed by such malicious service providers rather than ones who require legitimately higher levels of activity because their discomfort associated with participation is reduced.

Factors that precede Benefit Delay could also distort customer satisfaction. Benefit Delay often occurs because it takes time for the effects produced by the service to accumulate in the customer's body or mind. Since the production of the service is carried out through cooperation between the service provider and the customer, the effects accumulated in the customer's body or mind are generated by activities performed by both sides in the service delivery process. Furthermore, the effects are produced by the functions performed by the facilities used in the service delivery process.

Specifically, Benefit Delay will occur when it takes a certain amount of time for the effects produced to accumulate to certain levels: There are three levels in this process: The first is where positive changes begin to occur but the customers cannot perceive them. The second is where customers are able to perceive the positive changes that have occurred. The third is where the change reaches the customer's ultimate goal. We defined Benefits Delays at each of these levels as Occurrence Delay, Perception Delay, and Achievement Delay, respectively [1].

Assuming that Benefit Delay consists of these three types of delays, it depends not only on the effects of the activities of the service providers, the customers, and the facilities but also on the customer's perceptual ability and ultimate goal level. In particular, since the customer's ultimate goal level has a significant influence on benefit success, the degree of Benefit Delay may increase in a service organization with customers with higher ultimate goals, while there may be no Benefit Delay in service organizations with customers with lower ultimate goals. As a result, although both service organizations may possess comparable service delivery capabilities, the latter service organization may achieve higher customer satisfaction earlier than the

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former. In addition, in the consumption of educational services and medical services, customers using service organizations that possess the capabilities to deliver potentially high-level performance will invest a high amount of resources, such as time and effort, at a corresponding level. Without such an investment, customers would not actually receive the high amount of benefits. The investment of resources implies a high discomfort for customers, which may not be adequately compensated by the benefits from consumption. Therefore, if the customer's ultimate goal level is low, delivery of a high level of performance may create customer dissatisfaction. According to traditional satisfaction theory, performance exceeding customer expectations enhances customer satisfaction, but in the consumption of DBS, the opposite result may occur [2].

Therefore, in customer satisfaction research on services, scholars

and practitioners alike should consider the characteristics of the service, the negative emotions evoked by customer participation in the service delivery process, and the resources the customer has to spend to increase the chances of desirable outcomes.

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