

THE EMPIRICAL OF LINKAGE BETWEEN SERVICE QUALITY AND CUSTOMER'S BEHAVIOR INTENTION: THE THAI TELECOMMUNICATION INDUSTRY

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ABSTRACT

This study offers a contribution to the comprehensive body of knowledge of service quality. That is, how to develop and execute a market-oriented service strategy. This study is intended for executives in telecommunications firms facing intense competition. As the telecommunications industry has grown and matured, a different type of customer has gained access to fixed line and mobile phone devices, which in turn, has driven service providers to fight even harder for customer "wins." In particular, it has made them aware that keeping their customers, as opposed to spending all their time, money acquiring new customers, is vitally important in staying ahead in the telecommunication industry. Service providers need to understand the customers' perception of service quality, customer behavioral intentions and the importance of customer retention. The biggest advantage offered by customer retention is to help service operators in targeting the best customers. By building a profile and identifying the characteristics of preferred customers, service providers are better equipped to retain them. This study will enable telecommunication service operators to identify the most loyal customers, their preferences/dislikes and to build profiles of the preferred customers. Moreover, results from this study will reveal whether linkages exist among service quality indicators, and customer behavioral intentions in the Thai telecommunication industry. The finding supports the specific model and general information framework. Implementations for theory, service marketing, and future research are discussed.

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INTRODUCTION

With growing realization that improving quality was good for business and the necessary for effective competition, a radical change in thinking took place. Traditional notions of quality (bases on conformance to standards defined by operation mangers) were replaced by the new imperative of letting quality be customer

driven, which had enormous implications for the importance of services marketing and the role of customer service research. Numerous service organizations have since invested in research to determine what their customers want in every dimension of service, in quality improvement programs designed to deliver what

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customers want, and in ongoing measurement of how satisfied their customers are with the quality of service provided.

During the last decade of service quality research, Parasuraman, Zeithaml and Berry (1985) have concluded that excellent service is a profitable strategy because it results in more new customers, more business with existing customers, fewer lost customers, more insulation from price competition, and fewer mistakes requiring the re-performance of services. PIMS (Profit Impact of Market Strategy) research has indicated that companies that offer superior service are able to charge 8% more for their product (Gale, 1992), while achieving higher-than-normal market share growth (Buzzell and Gale, 1987) and profitability (Phillips, Chang, and Buzzell, 1983). Given the importance of service quality in our information and services-based global economy, we conducted a study of Thai telecommunication customers' expectations and perceptions of service quality with their service provide. This is particularly in the Thai telecommunication industry where delivering high service quality is a possible means of achieving competitive advantage, by the employing well-trained customer service staffs and reducing customer churn. In the past, companies in Thailand have focused mainly on production quality or technical standards. Today however, the focus has shifted to quantifying customers' assessments of service and products, then translating these measurements into specific internal standards. Failure to undertake these service quality initiatives will result in a loss of competitive advantage and ultimately market share. In fact, research in Thailand reveals that delivering high quality service is closely linked to customer satisfaction, cost saving, and market share in wide variety industries (Ratanaskuldilok, Tachaputapong, and Noochuoy, 1998). Our research also investigated the link between service quality assessments and stated behavioral intentions on the part of the Thai telecommunication customer. The remainder of the paper is organized as follows:

First, an overview of service quality and customer behavioral intentions are discussed. Next, the effect of services quality on customer behavioral intentions is explored. The study's methodology, hypotheses and results are then presented. Finally, the research concludes with a discussion of managerial implications and future research directions.

Overview of Service Quality and Customer Behavioral Intentions Literature

Service Quality

There is considerable evidence that service quality is an antecedent to customer satisfaction (Reidenbach and Sandifer-Smallwood 1990; Woodside, Frey, and Daly 1989; Cronin and Taylor 1992; Reichheld and Sasser 1990). They summarize the service quality-satisfaction customer loyalty relationship as follows: high-quality products and associated service designed to meet customer needs will create high levels of customer satisfaction. This high level of satisfaction will lead to greatly increased customer loyalty. And increased customer loyalty is the single most important driver of long-term financial performance (Reichheld and Sasser 1995, p. 91).

With the evidence that service quality leads to satisfaction which leads to customer loyalty, considerable practitioner interest has focused on programs to improve service quality (Farber and Wycoff, 1991; Schlesinger and Heskett, 1991; Treacy and Wiersema, 1993). One of the key elements in many of these service quality improvement programs has been the measurement of service quality. Service quality measurement is important as it has the potential to offer insights into areas of service quality strengths and weaknesses. In other words, it can serve as a diagnostic tool that guide management in its service quality improvement efforts by focusing attention in the areas that are most needful (Berry and Parasuraman, 1994). Positive customer

behavioral intentions should logically flow from service quality improvements and serve as signals of retention or defection. Customer behavioral intentions is the discussion of the next section.

Customer Behavioral Intentions

There is growing evidence that customer perception of service quality affects their behavioral intentions. Certain consumer behavioral responses provide a strong indication that they are becoming bound to the organization. For instance when consumers express a preference for one organization over others, or when they praise the organization or recommend it to others, they are demonstrating that they are becoming bound to the organization (Zeithaml, Berry, and Parasuraman, 1996).

Acknowledging that behaviors are difficult to predict and understand, it has been suggested that a person will generally act in accordance with predisposing intentions (Ajzen and Fishbein 1980). Intent to behave is a result of experience with a service or information deemed relevant by the consumer about that service. This predisposition or attitude is seen as a determining factor in a consumer's behavior toward the offering as future need arises

A focus of the study expands purchase intentions to include a more complete range of intended behaviors such as repeat purchase, complimenting, complaining, switching providers, and opting not to use any service at all. The basic aim is to explore the possibility of a link between service quality and future behavioral intentions. Because service quality has been shown to have multidimensional properties, it follows that various dimensions might have unique combinations for any given behavioral intent category in a telecommunication care setting. For example, a strong likelihood of a consumer exhibiting complimenting behavior is anticipated to be more closely associated with the assurance dimension of perceived service.

Methodology and Hypotheses

This study utilized a cross-sectional survey design to investigate service quality perceptions and their subsequent effect on customer behavior intentions in the Thai telecommunication industry. Questionnaires were distributed utilizing a convenience sampling from walk-in customers at service center during May-Jun 2001 time period. In addition, this study also was conducted under the same natural environment in which employees' service providers normally function, thus offering a greater degree of "realism".

Subjects for this study were obtained from two separate convenience samples: (a) the first sample was obtained from land-line telephone subscribers and (b) the second sample was obtained from mobile phone subscribers. This study collected data from existing customers who had previously used telecommunications services at least one day but who were not necessarily on a subscriber list. Of the 550 customers interviewed using a questionnaire, 484 usable responses were received for a response rate of 88 %.

The dependent variable in this study was customer behavioral intentions which depended on the customer's general assessment and attitude toward the service. It was generated by multiple transaction experiences. The independent variable in this study was service quality, measured as the difference between service quality perceptions and service quality expectations.

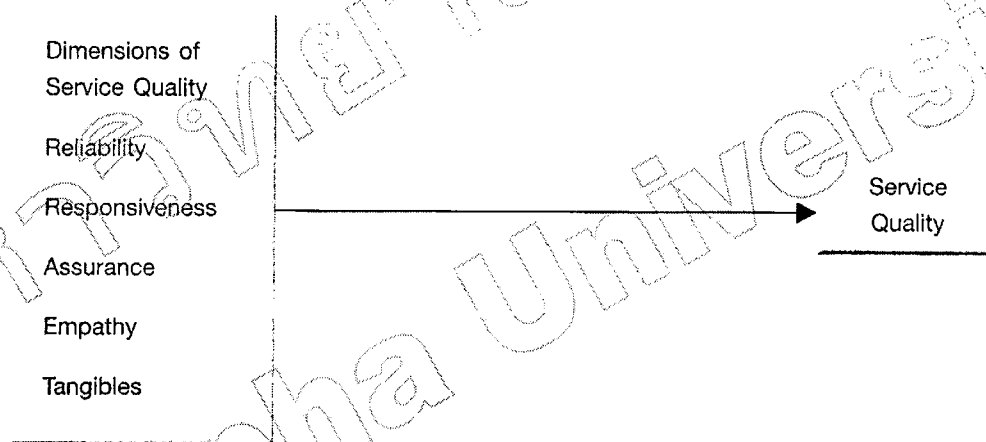
A number of covariates were also introduced in this study because of their likely association with the dependent variable, customer behavioral intentions. Covariates are typically included in a study to remove extraneous variation in the outcome variable. Effective covariates will improve the power of the tests and reduce within-group variance. In this study, the covariates of demographic/socioeconomic variables were predicted to cause variability in customer behavioral intentions. Investigating demographic variables is based on earlier

consumer behavior research that indicated that demographics were a salient factor in determining attitudes (Wells & Prensky, 1996)..

Service quality was measured using SERVQUAL, an effective tool for assessing customer expectations and perceptions based on the service quality gap model. The service quality gap model of Zeithaml, Berry and Parasuraman (1988) was used to develop SERVQUAL, a multi-item scale consisting of five dimensions: reliability, responsiveness, assurance, empathy, and tangibles (See Figure 1). the SERVQUAL instrument

was used to measure perceived service quality. The 22-item scale of perceived service quality from the SERVQUAL scale (Parasuraman, Zeithaml & Berry 1988) consisted of two sections: a 22-item section that records customer expectations and a second 22-item section that measured consumer perceptions. The direct measure of perceived service quality was based on responses to a seven-point semantic differential, using a Likert scale format, ranging from strongly agree (7) to strongly disagree (1).

Figure 1
Dimensions of Service Quality



Source: Parasuraman, Zeithaml, and Berry (1988)

Customer Behavior Intentions were measured using a 13-item behavioral intention scale developed by Zeithaml, Berry and Parasuraman (1996). This series of items represents an extension of the ten-item inventory of consumer complaint behavior intentions developed and validated by Singh (1988). The items were assessed using a 7-point likelihood scale where 1 = not at all likely, and 7 = extremely likely. An overall average of all the items was computed to determine the respondents behavioral intentions.

Hypotheses

This study proposes to test the following research hypotheses.

- H1: There is no significant difference in perceived service quality levels between fixed-telephone customers and mobile telephone customers
- H2: There is no significant difference in behavioral intentions level between fixed-telephone customers and mobile telephone customers

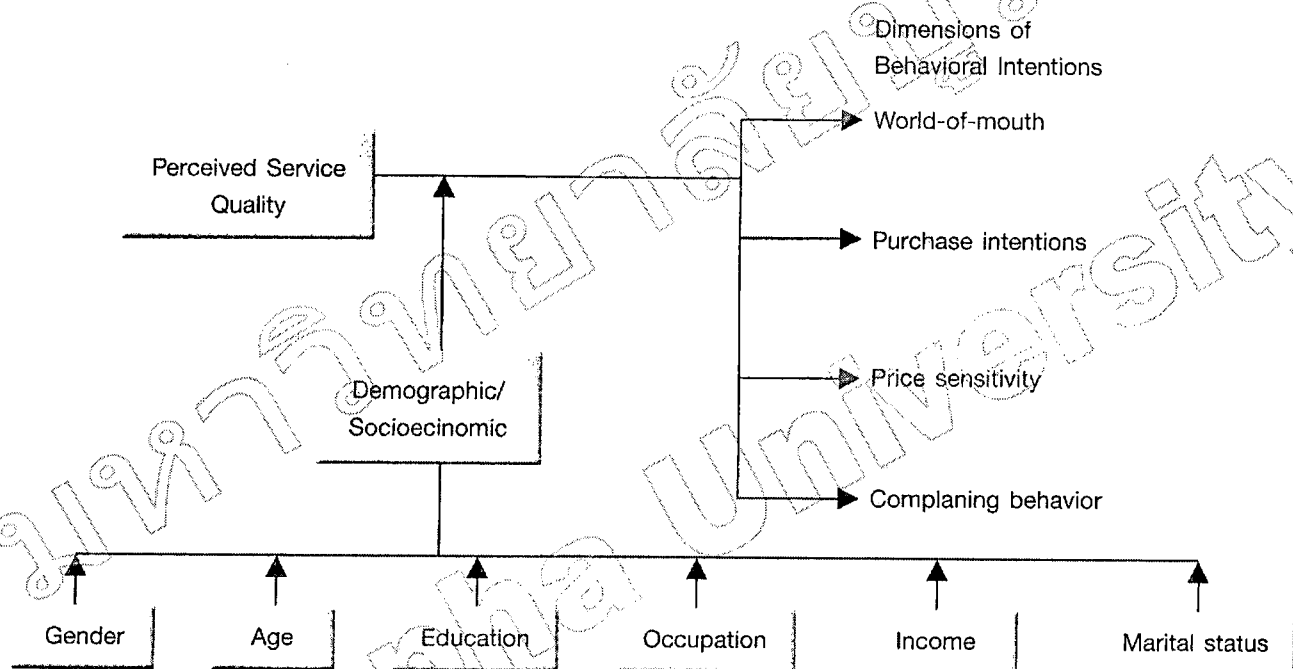
H3: There is no significant relationship between customers' perceived service quality and positive behavioral intentions for both (1) fixed telephone customers and (2) mobile telephone customers.

H4: There is no significant relationship between

customers' perceived service quality and each dimension of customers' behavioral intentions (word-of-mouth, purchase intentions, price sensitivity, and complaining behavior) for both (1) fixed telephone customers and (2) mobile telephone customers.

Figure 2

Process Model of Service Quality and Customer Behavioral Intentions



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Data Analysis

Much of current marketing action is based on the assumption that the perception of service quality (either positive or negative) by a consumer is connected to future consumer behavior. Logic would indicate that if consumers perceive positive service quality, they would most likely intend to repurchase or compliment the service; similarly, if they perceive negative service quality, they would most likely intend to complain, switch providers, and not use such services.

Reliability of the instruments was assessed using Cronbach's coefficient alpha for scales measuring service quality expectations, service quality perceptions, and customer behavioral intentions. Reliability varied from .75 to .93. Reliability coefficients of all five dimensions of service quality perceptions. It should be noted that reliability coefficients for all five dimensions exceeded .90. The results suggested a high reliability for each of the service quality scales. Reliability coefficients on the

four dimensions of customer behavioral intentions are .92, .49, .67, and .85 respectively. Two of the four dimensions of customer behavioral intention scale exhibited high levels of reliability, while two other dimensions yielded alphas below the .70 criterion level suggested by Nunnally (1978), although they were greater than or similar to the .50 minimum Cronbach's coefficient alpha value suggested by Churchill (1979).

The results of CFA revealed that each of the items in SERVQUAL and in behavioral intentions loaded as was theoretically predicted. The following measures represent the three types of overall model fit useful in CFA which was determined initially by examining the chi-square (χ^2) statistics for each operationalization variable at the .001 significance level (Hair, Anderson, Tatham, & Black 1995). Hence, convergent validity is established when two or more variables are highly correlated; on the other hand, discriminant validity is established when two or more variables are uncorrelated (Sekaran, 1984). The chi-square statistics in Table 1 for SERVQUAL and behavioral intentions based on significance level of 0.001 indicate an acceptable model fit. The goodness-of-fit index (GFI) and adjusted goodness-of-fit index (AGFI) were two other overall fit

measures reported. Neither measure indicated acceptable overall fit. The root mean squared error of approximation (RMSEA) was a final fit measure reported which also indicated a poor overall fit. Thus, it appears that the overall fit measures for both service quality (SERVQUAL) and customer behavioral intentions failed to meet the stated minimum criteria.

Results of Hypotheses

A t-test used to test Hypothesis I indicated there was not a statistically significant difference perceived service quality level between fixed-telephone customers and mobile telephone customers. Thus, it appears that service quality levels for fixed telephone customers are equal to those of mobile telephone customers. The results of t-test for Hypothesis Two indicated no significant difference in behavioral intentions between fixed-telephone customers and mobile telephone (see Table 2). Thus, it appears that behavioral intentions of fixed telephone customers are equal to those of mobile telephone customers. Hence, customer's perceived service quality and behavioral intentions are able to be representative of respondents either fixed-and mobile telephone customers in this research

Table 1

Goodness-of-Fit Measures for Confirmatory Factor Analysis: SERVQUAL and Customer's Behavioral Intentions

Goodness-of-Fit Measures	SERVQUAL expectation	SERVQUAL perceptions	Behavioral Intentions
1. Absolute Fit Measures			
1.1 Chi-square of estimate model (χ^2):	3404.81	3676.1	680.446
Degrees of freedom	209	209	65
Significance level	0.001	0.001	0.001
1.2 Noncentrality parameter (NCP)	10.267	9.732	1.551
1.3 Goodness-of-Fit index (GFI)	0.507	0.520	0.794
1.4 Root mean square residual (RMSR)	0.19	0.178	0.128
1.5 Root mean square error of approximate (RMSA)	0.222	0.216	0.154
p-value of close fit (RMSA < .08)			
1.6 Expected cross-validation index (ECVI)	7.621	7.802	1.520
2. Incremental Fit Measures			
2.1 Chi-square of null or independent model	5679.862	6921.280	1560.873
Degree of freedom	231	231	78
Significance level	0.000	0.000	0.000
2.2 Adjusted goodness-of-fit index (AGFI)	0.403	0.419	0.712
2.3 Tucker-Lewis (TLI) or Non Normed fit index (NNFI)	0.352	0.427	0.562
2.4 Normed fit index (NFI)	0.401	0.469	0.564
3. Parsimonious Fit Measures			
3.1 Parsimony normed fit index (PNFI)	0.362	0.424	0.470
3.2 Parsimony Goodness-of-Fit index	0.4188	0.4296	0.5671
3.3 Akaike information criterion (AIC)	7.231	7.793	1.516
3.4 Comparative fit index (CFI)	0.413	0.482	0.585
4. Calculated Measures of Overall Model Goodness-of-Fit			
4.1 Normed Chi-square	16.291	17.589	10.4684
4.2 Scaled Noncentrality parameter (SNCP)	0.021	0.020	0.0032
Sample size (respondents)	484	484	484

* (Hair, Anderson, Tatham, & Black 1995)

Table 2

Hypotheses Test for Mean Difference of Perceived Service Quality and Behavioral Intentions.

Variance	df	Standard Error	t-value	Significance
Mean difference of Perceived Service Quality: Fixed-and Mobile telephone customers	482	0.0944	-0.299	$p > .05$
Mean difference of Behavioral Intentions: Fixed-and Mobile telephone customers	482	0.0653	-.0513	$p > .05$

For Hypothesis 3, the strength of behavioral was measured relative to service quality levels. It was anticipated that higher perceived service quality will generate favorable intentions (e.g., word-of-mouth, and repurchase intentions) and that lower perceived service quality will lead to unfavorable intentions (e.g., price sensitivity, complaining, switching, and nonuse of any services). These relationships are tested by simple regression analysis using each relevant intention factor as the dependent variable and the combined 22-item perceived service quality difference score as the independent variable. The results indicate that anticipated directional relationship between perceived service quality and various behavioral intent dimensions of Thai telecommunication consumers is indeed present (see Table 3). Although most of the relationships examined were significant, they exhibit weak explanatory power. Hence, perceptions of higher service quality may lead to more favorable customer behavioral intentions.

have differential importance as perceived service quality changes. Multiple regression analysis was used to investigate this possibility in the telecommunication care setting at hand. Each intention measured was treated as a separate dependent variable and mean sub-scale scores for perceived service quality were used as independent variables. Table 4 reflects the relationships found and the order of entry for each sub-scale dimension of behavioral intentions. It appears that some future intentions to act in regard to telecommunication care services can be explained by different service quality dimensions. Significant relationships were found for every intention except at .001 level and .05 level. The positive direction of relationship between perceived service quality and each behavioral intentions dimensions, except negative direction of "complaining behavioral". Of particular managerial interest are the dimensions found to be statistically significant among the intentions. These dimensions show a significant relationship with perceived service quality and most behavioral intents under study.

For hypothesis 4 testing, it is entirely possible that dimensional elements of behavioral intentions would

Table 3

A Regression Output: The Perceived Service Quality and Customer Behavioral Intentions Model

Dependent Variable: Behavioral Intentions

Variable	Coefficient	t-value	p-value
Perceived Service Quality	0.234	5.264	<.001
Gender	0.035	0.769	>.05
Age	0.058	0.993	>.05
Education	0.146	-3.142	<.05
Occupation	0.032	0.718	>.05
Income	0.024	-0.483	>.05
Marital Status	-0.109	-1.968	<.05
Std. Error of estimate	0.6873		
R ² =	0.094	Adjust R ² =	0.081

Analysis of Variance					
Model	df	Sum of square	Mean square	F value	p-value
Regression	7	23.413	3.345	7.081	<.001
Residual	476	224.822	0.472		

Goodness-of-Fit measure			
Chi-square of estimate model: χ^2	282.237	df. = 44	$p < 0.001$
Goodness-of-Fit index: GFI	0.899		
Adjusted GFI	0.848		
Root mean square error of approximate: RMSA	0.109		
Comparative fix index: CFI	0.574		

Table 4

Results of Perceived Service Quality and Customer Behavioral Intentions

Perceived Service Quality	Overall Customer Behavioral Intentions	Dimensions of Behavioral Intentions			
		Word of mouth	Purchasing intentions	Price sensitivity	Complaining behavioral
Tangible					
coefficient	0.143	0.241	0.066	0.029	-0.009
T-value	2.493	4.477**	1.110	0.496	-0.155
p-value	<.05	<.001	>.05	>.05	>.05
Reliability					
coefficient	0.088	0.104	0.069	0.056	-0.015
T-value	1.385	1.759	1.053	0.862	-0.229
p-value	>.05	>.05	>.05	>.05	>.05
Responsiveness					
coefficient	0.017	0.003	0.026	-0.002	0.020
T-value	0.347	0.057	0.507	-0.043	0.379
p-value	>.05	>.05	>.05	>.05	>.05
Assurance					
coefficient	0.150	0.193	0.107	0.990	-0.029
T-value	2.597*	3.576**	1.791	1.526	-0.488
p-value	<.05	<.001	>.05	>.05	>.05
Empathy					
coefficient	-0.023	-0.037	-0.014	0.174	-0.164
T-value	-0.460	-0.806	-0.267	3.434**	-3.195**
p-value	>.05	>.05	>.05	<.001	<.001
Overall Perceived Service Quality					
coefficient	0.253	0.339	0.172	0.222	-0.122
T-value	5.737**	7.913**	3.835**	4.994**	-2.693*
p-value	<.001	<.001	<.001	<.001	<.05

Note: * indicates a significant level (p-value < .05) and

** indicates a significant level (p-value < .001)

Conclusions

The adapted perceived service quality measurement scale investigated here has proved to be equally reliable in a telecommunication service setting. This research effort also suggests a different dimensional substructure for customer's behavioral intentions construct and service quality in a telecommunication services setting. Although the structure found is not entirely consistent with the dimensional structure outlined by the scale developers, there are definite similarities. This would suggest that basing quality measurement efforts on SERVQUAL is appropriate for the telecommunication services field, but that practitioners should watch closely for unique situations that call for adaptation.

As an extension, this research effort establishes that a strong relationship between perceived service quality and a range of basic consumer behavior intentions does exist. The research does produce significant relationships between perceived service quality and repurchase intentions, word-of-mouth, price sensitivity, and complaining behavior. The low explanatory power of these relationships suggests caution in their full acceptance, but the intuitive and statistical relationships suggest that strategic decisions based on assumed connections between perceived service quality and consumer behavior in the telecommunication services arena have scientific grounds.

A basic conclusion is clarification of the connection between perceived service quality and a realistic range of future consumer behaviors. This connection is strong enough to confirm inhibition and extend earlier research. Whatever the temporal order a consumer may use to include perceived service quality in a judgment to act, it does seem clear that there are predictable relationships between perceived quality and behavioral intentions. Positive perceptions of service quality are associated with consumers' intent to repurchase and compliment services, whereas negative perceived

service quality is associated with consumers' intent to avoid the service and/or complain about the service. These more fully explored relationships offer practitioners useful connections in their efforts to strive for quality in service delivery.

An additional finding managers may find useful is the discovery that, in this telecommunication care services setting, service quality dimensions of reliability, tangibility, responsiveness, assurance and empathy have greater importance in explaining a consumer's intent to behave. This suggests that it is appropriate for telecommunication service administrators to focus service quality efforts in specific areas for best results. If only limited resources are available to implement service quality improvements, ensuring that the promised service is performed accurately, dependably, and with caring, individualized attention would offer the best return in customer satisfaction and customer bonding for repeat business.

Recommendations

The manager should consider the varying impact that both process and technical factors of a service have on level of perceived service quality. Findings of this research indicate a distinct importance for the process aspects of a service. The original SERVQUAL and this adapted scale rely heavily on process-oriented items to measure perceived quality. Since (1991), Lytle and Mokwa (1992) and Zeithaml, Berry and Parasuraman (1993) all argue for and investigate more comprehensive structures for customer satisfaction and quality and suggest that outcome does have an effect on customer perceptions of quality and satisfaction. In the telecommunication services field, the necessity of at least an acceptable telecommunication outcome, or technical performance, should not be ignored. Some inclusion of the role that telecommunication outcome or technical elements play in forming service quality perceptions seems necessary to complement our

understanding of perceived service quality and its impact on consumer behavior. If the industry persists in measuring and monitoring the perceptual aspects of telecommunication service quality, the complementary aspects of basic outcome must be tracked as well to assure an appropriate and satisfactory customer experience.

Managerial Implications

The findings of this study indicate that improving service quality leads to increase favorable behavioral intentions among Thai telecommunication customers. Customers want to do business with companies that keep their promises, particularly their promises about the core service attributes such as customer service, and customer care in telecommunication service centers. Scale reliability for both SERVQUAL and customer behavioral intentions was confirmed in this study. However, both scales indicated rather poor validity based on the overall model fit measures reported. However, factor analysis (principle component) seems to confirm at least acceptable discriminant validity for both SERVQUAL and customer behavioral intentions. It should

be noted that a four-factor structure for the customer behavioral intentions scale was found, thus possibly accounting for the relatively low overall fit indices.

The affect of service quality on customer's behavioral intentions indicate that Thai telecommunication companies should measure customer's behavioral intentions and monitor their sensitivity to changes in service performance, and thus, gain valuable insight on why and how to invest in service improvement. Behavioral intentions can be viewed as positive or negative consequences of service quality such as, saying positive things about the company's services, recommending the company's services to others, remaining loyal, and spending more in services from company.

Therefore a managerial priority should be to identify the most important performance cues used by guests in assessing quality within their respective establishments, and thereafter ensure that the key performers are equipped to perform well (Kelley, 1992). The implication of the design of service delivery system should be clear to positive the moment of truth. Ensure that the point of customers contact are reduce the minimum and which are excellent and standardized of quality.

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