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**Are We Being Served?: Consumer versus retailers perceptions of customer
service expectations within selected menswear stores**

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Are We Being Served?: Consumer versus retailers perceptions of customer service expectations within selected menswear stores

ABSTRACT

This paper examines the mismatch between consumer and retailer perceptions of customer service and its potential impact on customer satisfaction. Having examined the main influences and themes from primary research this paper attempts to suggest that there is potential for developing new models of customer service and that different strategic directions to service in menswear retailing can be explored.

1. INTRODUCTION

The British Menswear sector has undergone a metamorphosis during the last fifteen years. Increased competition, a maturing of the male population, declining retail sales and changing consumer lifestyles represent some of the factors that have impacted upon the industry (Mintel 2000). As differentiation has long been viewed as a driver of success, retailers are required to continually address the efficacy of their service strategies (Levitt, 1980; Christopher et al, 1991, Murphy 1996). Bitner, et al, (1990; 1992) maintain that one way of sustaining long-term competitive advantage is through the “service encounter” and that the personal interaction between customer and employee is as important as the product itself.

The aim of this paper is to examine the relationship between consumer and retailer perceptions of customer service and the potential impact any mismatch may have upon customer satisfaction. The paper will first highlight the importance of customer service to the menswear sector. This will then be followed by a brief methodology. The remaining sections detail the results from empirical research before, finally, a series of conclusions are drawn.

2. THE MENSWEAR SECTOR and CUSTOMER SERVICE

The menswear fashion sector classified as Standard Industrial Classification (SIC) 52.42/52.43 (SDM 28) comprises of textiles, clothing and footwear. The 1980s and 1990s saw a decline in traditional fashion markets, increased competition from large domestic retailers, international entrants and the growth of the discount sector (Moore, 1995; Easey, 1995; Lea-Greenwood, 1998).

A variety of formats characterise the market with multiple/specialists, variety/department stores and independents all being in evidence (Mintel 2000). The dominance of large businesses, (defined as having a turnover of more than £5m) and a decline of small businesses can also be identified (SDM 28). In order to remain competitive, retailers have provided a series of strategic responses including a

reassessment of supplier relationships (Marks and Spencer), disinvestment (Storehouse) and geographical retrenchment (C&A).

Moreover retailers have sought to differentiate their product offer from the competition. Given the level of market consolidation that now characterises the industry and the similarity of multiple retailers (BMRB 1999), such a task is not always easily achievable. One means of differentiating the offer has been through customer service, although the extent to which this takes precedent over other factors in the purchasing decision remains uncertain. For example, Birtwistle and Freathy (1998) maintained that consumer's perceptions of service was not rated highly, relative to other operational criteria.

2.1 Customer Service

Customer service has several definitions and, has over the past decade become interminably inter-linked with the concept of relationship marketing (Buttle, 1996a; 1996b). As service quality is characterised by both tangible and intangible elements, delivering a quality service to the consumer becomes a central means of maintaining a competitive advantage (Zeithaml and Bitner, 2000). The quality of the customer - retailer relationship therefore represents a key differentiating factor within the marketplace but can only be influenced when consumers evaluations of the service is known (Gronroos 1982).

Perceptions of service quality within retailing is dominated by employee - customer contact, where, as part of the purchase transaction, consumers make decisions about the service received based on their expectations. These are influenced in part, by employee behaviour (Parasuraman et al, 1985) and the development of interpersonal relationships (Snyder 1986 in Bloemer et al. 1999, Mackintosh and Lockshin, 1998; Dick and Basu, 1994 in Bloemer et al. 1999). Strong interpersonal relationships between employee and customer have been identified as having a positive influence upon a consumer's propensity to remain loyal (Snyder 1986). Mackintosh and Lockshin (1998) reinforced this view and noted that loyalty was more dependent on:

“the development of interpersonal relationships as opposed to loyalty with tangible products” (p.1085).

It is clear that the purchase of a good cannot be separated from the service levels that accompany the transaction (Carmen and Langeard 1980; Gronroos 1978; Regan 1973; and Upah 1980). If consumers expectations are not met they may choose to shop elsewhere (Clark 1997; Peel, 1993; and Zeithaml and Bitner, 2000). The failure to meet expectations may manifest itself in many forms, for example, the failure of the retailer to understand customer needs (Parasuraman et al. 1991 in Buttle, 1996); or the failure to deliver the required level of service (Bitner 1995). Such failures represent a common concern for the retailer. As the purchase transaction may be the only contact a consumer has with the company an image will be build based on this perception.

2.2 Measuring Customer Service Quality

It therefore remains in the retailer's interest to have a clear understanding of the perceptions and expectations of the consumer. There remain a variety of different models designed to measure the quality of the service provided by the retailer. One of the most documented models for measuring service quality is Parasuraman et al's (1985) SERVQUAL Model. This measures

“customers’ expectations of what firms should provide in the industry being studied and their perceptions of how a given service provider performs against these criterion” (East, 1997, pg. 201).

The model examines five dimensions of service quality: reliability; assurance; tangibles; empathy and responsiveness to service. It also proposes that a gap often exists between a consumer's expectations and perceptions of these dimensions. While several writers (Buttle, 1996; East 1997; Carmen 1990; Carmen, 1990; Brown and Swartz; 1989; Finn and Lamb 1991; Gagliano and Hathcote 1994) disputed the credibility of this model, the framework remains useful in this paper.

3. METHODOLOGY

This paper examines and identifies potential mismatches between consumer and retailer perceptions of customer service within two menswear stores. Each store had similar though not identical target markets. For reasons of confidentiality they cannot be identified.

Store A's company literature describes their primary market as aged between 25 - 49 years, of a C1 and C2 social background who is considered to be a “regular bloke”. Store B offers contemporary, modern and formal wear to a core customer base aged between 20-35 with an ABC1 profile.

The first stage of the research was conducted over a two week period, where a quota convenience sample (Easey 1995) of 300 purchasers from each store (A and B) were questioned upon exiting the store. A purchaser was identified by being in possession of a store bag. Such an approach reflects a similar method adopted by Nicholls et al (1998). Questions took into account Gagliano and Hathcote's (1994) previous research, the SERVQUAL model and examined attitudes in relation to the consumer's actual purchase, past purchase behaviour and demographics.

The second stage of the research involved in-depth interviews with the two store managers. The main purpose of this element of the research was to determine whether there were differences in the perceived and expected service of consumers and retailers.

4. RESULTS DISCUSSION

In attempting to identify the factors that contributed to service quality, the research examined three issues. These were the characteristics and appearance of the sales personnel; the importance of customer service; and consumer's expectations and perceptions of selected store attributes.

4.1 Characteristics of the Sales Personnel

Adams (1975) suggested that sales personnel characteristics should be similar to consumers. The research identified that the gender and age of sales personnel was not important for most consumers during purchasing, although this did alter in relation to consumers age and gender (Tables 1 and 2). Both stores primary market segments, had no strong preferences for being served by someone of the same gender or age. Only those consumers in the 55 plus age range (and outside the primary target) intimated a stronger preference for being "served by someone of the same gender as themselves". Such a finding supports Websters (1989) demographic/expectations theory.

Reinforcing this finding, the qualitative research identified that retailers did not recruit employees to specifically match the target consumer profile, although one retailer did indicate that:

"older males tend to prefer the same gender serving them" (Store A),

A more detailed examination of the results highlighted other tangible and non-tangible elements to be important. These included the appropriate dress code; the amount of eye contact being made; being served promptly; courteous conversation and being acknowledged whilst queuing to make the purchase. The latter two aspects in particular were identified as the most important for the primary customer segments.

The reasons behind the variances in age and gender remain beyond the scope of this paper. The findings however do extend Adams (1976) theory and Hartline and Ferrell's proposal (1996) that employees should adapt their behaviour to meet the interpersonal demands of the service encounter. It furthers Zeithaml and Bitners (2000) work on adaptation of service encounter scripts to meet the needs of the individual consumer.

4.2 The Importance of Customer Service

A strong relationship was identified between good customer service and a consumer's propensity to remain loyal to a store (Table 3). A majority of consumers across all age ranges and both genders strongly agreed with this finding. In particular, this view was held by older males. Such findings reinforce Clark's (1997) proposal that suggested a relationship between the importance of customer service and winning

customer loyalty. It also extends Easey's (1995) suggestion that the importance of service quality will increase as consumers get older.

Evidence from the qualitative research indicated that retailers rated customer service rates as highly as consumers. In particular, three issues were evident:

- customer service was seen as being just as important as the products sold in store and certainly a contributory factor in gaining competitive advantage;
- customer service was considered part of a total package and an influence in the consumer decision making process;
- customer service becomes a particular issue for consumers when there is a delivery failure or when the consumer has previously experienced bad service.

4.3 Consumers Expectations and Perceptions of Customer Service

Consumer expectations and perceptions of customer service were measured pre and post purchase in relation to five store attributes. These were convenience of store; queue length; quality of clothing; assortment of clothing and the price of clothing (Table 4).

Pre purchase, consumer expectations were ranked in order of importance as being quality of clothing; assortment of clothing; customer service; price of clothing; queue length and convenience. Customer service was not considered the most important attribute from the six and was ranked third behind the two product attributes. This mirrors Gagliano and Hathcotes (1994) findings where merchandise was rated first in terms of importance.

Post purchase perceptions differed, and ranked in order of importance length of queue; quality of clothing; price of clothing; convenience; customer service and assortment of clothing. The results suggests that while expectations are not being fully met (for factors such as customer service, quality of clothing and assortment of clothing), the gap between expected and perceived customer service was minimal.

The research also identified differences on the basis of age and gender. For example, younger male consumers, (the target market), rated quality and assortment of clothing as the most important attributes. Customer service and queue length became more important for the mature male (the secondary market segment). Younger female consumers expected more from assortment of clothing and convenience of the store while older females expected more from quality and customer service. Older female consumer's perception of customer service, queue length, quality of clothing, price of clothing and assortment of clothing was not as high as their male counterparts.

5. CONCLUSIONS

This paper has identified several themes relating to the delivery of service quality.

- Consumers do not always require a sales person's characteristics to mirror their own demographic composition.
- A strong relationship between good customer service and a consumer's propensity to remain loyal was identified.
- Retailers are able to successfully match pre-purchase expectations with post purchase perceptions of customer service.
- Loyalty and customer service attributes are influenced by age and gender.

While both retailers in this study were able to broadly satisfy the needs of their primary target markets, the research highlighted disparities between different consumer groups. Such a finding needs to be examined in relation to the external environment where a maturing UK male population and increased sector competition, may require retailers to reassess the importance of staff composition, employee criteria and training procedures. Not only do these areas provide opportunities for retailers to differentiate their service, they provide an opportunity to adapt to changing demographic trends.

6 MANAGEMENT IMPLICATIONS

In order to ensure that retailers continue to provide service quality consistent with their target market, a series of recommendations for retailers are provided.

- Conduct research to identify what effects any loss of consumers through service has to the business.
- Examine the use of 360 degree appraisals to identify if role conflict or ambiguity exists in employees.
- Develop an ongoing research programme to include observation, focus groups, and diaries to ensure the correct customer service attributes continue to offered.
- Adapt training policies for contact staff during the purchase transaction to introduce appropriate body language and conversation for categories of consumers that require it.
- Adapt the management of queues in store to include acknowledging consumer types that expressed a desire for this, i.e. mainly older consumers.

Table 1: Preference of consumers for being served by someone of the same gender as themselves at the cash point in percentages (Tn = 600)

| Preference | 16-24 | | 25-34 | | 35-44 | | 44-54 | | 55 plus | |
|------------|-------|------|-------|------|-------|------|-------|------|---------|------|
| | M | F | M | F | M | F | M | F | M | F |
| SA | .6 | 0 | 1.6 | 0 | 3.5 | 2.4 | 2.3 | 0 | 4.3 | 7.4 |
| A | 5.8 | 16.0 | 3.2 | 16.7 | 2.4 | 12.2 | 4.7 | 12.2 | 4.3 | 18.5 |
| NNA | 58.4 | 44.0 | 56.8 | 41.7 | 55.3 | 48.8 | 58.1 | 56.1 | 52.2 | 33.3 |
| D | 10.4 | 8.0 | 11.2 | 11.1 | 10.6 | 7.3 | 11.6 | 12.2 | 17.4 | 29.6 |
| SD | 24.7 | 32.0 | 27.2 | 30.6 | 28.2 | 29.3 | 23.3 | 19.5 | 21.7 | 11.1 |
| | 100 | 100 | 100 | 100 | 100 | 100 | 100 | 100 | 100 | 100 |

SA = Strongly agree, A = agree, NNA = Neither agree nor disagree, D = Disagree, SD = Strongly disagree, M = Male, F = Female

Table 2: Preference of consumers for being served by someone of the same age as themselves at the cash point in percentages (Tn=600)

| Preference | 16-24 | | 25-34 | | 35-44 | | 44-54 | | 55 plus | |
|------------|-------|------|-------|------|-------|------|-------|------|---------|------|
| | M | F | M | F | M | F | M | F | M | F |
| SA | 1.1 | 0 | 1.6 | 0 | 0 | 2.4 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 7.4 |
| A | 10.4 | 8.0 | 7.2 | 16.7 | 8.2 | 9.8 | 9.3 | 9.8 | 4.3 | 11.1 |
| NNA | 54.5 | 52.0 | 56.0 | 41.7 | 52.9 | 48.8 | 62.8 | 58.5 | 69.6 | 51.9 |
| D | 10.4 | 12.0 | 9.6 | 5.6 | 12.9 | 12.2 | 4.7 | 7.3 | 4.3 | 18.5 |
| SD | 23.4 | 28.0 | 25.6 | 36.1 | 25.9 | 26.8 | 23.3 | 24.4 | 21.7 | 11.1 |
| | 100 | 100 | 100 | 100 | 100 | 100 | 100 | 100 | 100 | 100 |

SA = Strongly agree, A = agree, NNA = Neither agree nor disagree, D = Disagree, SD = Strongly disagree, M = Male, F = Female

Table 3: Quality of customer service effecting consumers decisions to shop again at the same store in percentages (Tn =600)

| Preference | 16-24 | | 25-34 | | 35-44 | | 44-54 | | 55 plus | |
|------------|-------|------|-------|------|-------|------|-------|------|---------|------|
| | M | F | M | F | M | F | M | F | M | F |
| SA | 37.7 | 56.0 | 48.8 | 50.0 | 43.5 | 58.5 | 51.2 | 43.9 | 56.5 | 29.6 |
| A | 42.9 | 36.0 | 39.2 | 19.4 | 35.3 | 31.7 | 34.9 | 36.6 | 30.4 | 40.7 |
| NNA | 8.4 | 8.0 | 4.8 | 19.4 | 14.1 | 9.8 | 11.6 | 14.6 | 8.7 | 25.9 |
| D | 7.1 | 0 | 6.4 | 11.1 | 1.2 | 0 | 0 | 4.9 | 0 | 3.7 |
| SD | 3.9 | 0 | 0.8 | 0 | 5.9 | 0 | 2.3 | 0 | 4.3 | 0 |
| | 100 | 100 | 100 | 100 | 100 | 100 | 100 | 100 | 100 | 100 |

SA = Strongly agree, A = agree, NNA = Neither agree nor disagree, D = Disagree, SD = Strongly disagree, M = Male, F = Female

Table 4: Mean ranking and standard deviations for expectation and perceptions of attributes (Tn = 600)

| Tn = 600 Attribute | Expected | | Perceived | | E-P Mean | Expected | Perceived | E-P SD |
|------------------------|----------|--------|-----------|--------|-------------|----------|-----------|----------|
| | Rank | Mean | Rank | Mean | Variance | SD | SD | Variance |
| Customer Service | 3 | 1.7350 | 5 | 1.7867 | -0.0517 | 0.7847 | 0.7014 | 0.0833 |
| Convenience | 6 | 2.0300 | 4 | 1.735 | 0.2950 | 0.8348 | 0.6944 | 0.1404 |
| Length of Queue | 5 | 1.9700 | 1 | 1.4767 | 0.4933 | 0.9595 | 0.7706 | 0.1889 |
| Quality of Clothing | 1 | 1.4400 | 2 | 1.6550 | -0.2150 | 0.6354 | 0.6905 | -0.0551 |
| Assortment of Clothing | 2 | 1.6050 | 6 | 1.8733 | -0.2683 | 0.7164 | 0.7885 | -0.0721 |
| Price of Clothing | 4 | 1.8533 | 3 | 1.7383 | 0.1150 | 0.8943 | 0.7193 | 0.1750 |

E - P = Expectation - Perceptions of attributes, SD Standard Deviation.

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