

▼ Introduction to Delivering Online Service Quality: The Role of IT Minitrack

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Customers form opinions about service quality based on their encounters with an organization. Increasingly, these encounters take place through a range of channels which are almost invariably mediated or supported by information technology. Consequently, delivered service quality relies on integrated internal information systems supported by an appropriate organizational culture.

Our understanding has come a long way since the 1970's and 80's, when 'quality' commonly referred to product quality and the focus was on statistical control techniques at the manufacturing plant. In the 1980's an increasing number of firms also adopted the principles of Total Quality Management. Around this time, marketing researchers began to investigate the determinants of customer perceived service quality. So, product quality was the domain of productions and operations engineers and service quality was the domain of marketers. The role of information technology was only rarely included.

Service quality was considered different from product quality because services are: intangible (and thus subject to perceptual evaluation); non-storable (so they cannot be produced in advance and checked for quality before delivery); heterogeneous (differing across encounters when human actors are the delivery agents); and inseparable (often involving input from the customer in the production of the service). These factors combine to make service quality more difficult to control and evaluate in the face-to-face encounter.

In modern multi-channel organizations information systems become increasingly important as service encounters and delivered quality occur online (via the Internet, self-service kiosks, or mobile computing technologies); through print and electronic catalogues; and in physical stores. In this environment, the inseparability of service and product is not always clear cut (Tate, Hope, & Johnstone, 2006). For example, a website will be developed well in advance of its use; the customer experience is likely to be more consistent, the service is storable and able to be checked before 'delivery'; and there may be greater separation of the customer from the service production.

Sousa and Voss (2006) describe three components of multi-channel service quality: physical channel

service quality (delivered by people), virtual channel service quality (automated delivery), and integration quality (cross channel). In the *physical channel*, face to face service is routinely supported by systems that facilitate the customer service encounter. For example, in banking, the teller uses computer terminals to access account data and customer information. In the *virtual channel*, online service is delivered via advanced information, telecommunications, and multi-media technologies. In banking, the customer may log on to a website from anywhere in the world to transfer funds from a savings account to repay part of a mortgage. *Integration quality* allows the customer seamless service across multiple channels in the same transaction. A bank customer may discuss the potential for a loan via the phone contact centre, complete the relevant form online, receive notification of acceptance via email, and go to the nearest bank branch the next day to sign the documents—with all channels having access to the same information.

In this environment, the underlying service delivery systems differ fundamentally from those required in traditional firms, in that they may rely on automated service delivery as distinct from service delivery with a human component (Sousa & Voss, 2006). This effectively decouples the service agent from the customer, making it more difficult to detect and respond to service failures. Defining and implementing successful service delivery systems is a persistent challenge.

While the customer may have little or no awareness of the service delivery systems, there is little doubt that these systems impact the delivery of online service quality. Understanding the mechanics required to deliver service quality and the information systems that support them is an area of ongoing concern in the services research agenda. The papers in this track investigate how IT is being used to support the delivery of online service quality.

Sousa, R. & Voss C.A. (2006). Service quality in multi-channel services employing virtual channels, *Journal of Service Research*, 8(4), 356-371.

Tate, M., Hope, B. & Johnstone, D. (2006). ICT, Multi-channels, and the changing line of visibility: An empirical study. *Proceedings of the 39th Hawaii International Conference on System Sciences (HICSS)*.