GOVERNANCE OF THE MUNICIPAL SERVICES TO THE POPULATION: THE CASE OF AN EMERGING ECONOMY

Lamlile Ndlovu*, Maxwell Agabu Phiri**

* MBA graduate from the School of management, IT & Governance at the University of KwaZulu-Natal, South Africa
** Lecturer in the School of Management of the University of KwaZulu-Natal, South Africa

Abstract

The purpose of this study was to investigate farming community perceptions and expectations of quality of extension services rendered by the Department of Agriculture and Environmental Affairs (DAEA) within the uMngungundlovu District Municipality. In order to achieve the article's objective, the researcher used a SERVQUAL questionnaire and collected and analyzed the data using Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS). The results have shown that the customers perceive that they receive superior service from the extension staff. However the negative differences need to be eliminated to exceed the expectations of customers.

Keywords: Customer Satisfaction, Expectations, Marketing Mix, Perceptions, SERVQUAL

1. INTRODUCTION

Zeithaml and Bitner (2006:4) define service as "deeds , processes, and performances" whilst Blem (1995:6) explains that service refers to all the activities which create bonds between organizations and their customers. Cant et al. (2006:282) describe service as any act or performance that one party can offer to another that is essentially intangible and does not result in the ownership of anything.

The service sector in South Africa consists of a wide variety of organizations, for example South African government departments and parastatal organizations such as Eskom and the South African Broadcasting Corporatins (SABC), which make up a large proportion of the service sector. Services are an important part of the future of government and a Batho Pele (people first) programme has been instituted. This programme is based on 11 principles such as courtesy, access, service standard, consultation, value for money, redress, openness, transparency, information encouranging innovation and rewarding excellence,customer impact and leadership and strategic direction Cant et al. (2006:282).

According to Curry and Sinclair (2002: 199) sited in Moletsane, de Klerk and Bevan-Dye (2014), service delivery and service quality, determined by the disparity between the expectations of the community and its perceptions of the service actually delivered can provide an organisation with a lasting competitive advantage, Van der Wal, Pampallis and Bond (2002). The quality of services provided by organisations can mean the difference between success and failure. Service quality, customer satisfaction and customer value have become the main concerns in service organisations and, as a result, many organisations are paying more attention to improving service delivery and service quality Wang, Hing-Po and Yung (2004).

The agricultural sector is crucial to rural development and has a significant impact on reducing poverty. For this reason there is a great need for strong extension and advisory services, led by government's operations working hand- in- hand with relevant role -players. The Agricultural Extension Services are the most important link in the chain of development between the Department of Agriculture and Environmental Affairs, hereafter, the DAEA, and farming communities. As such, the extension services have a key role to play in increasing agricultural production, which is the basis of rural development.

Hence, the primary aim of the study reported in this article is to determine the farming community's expectations and perceptions of the quality of extension municipal services rendered by a South African municipality, situated in the Kwa-Zulu Natal province, in order to identify potential service quality gaps.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1. Characteristics of Services

All products have a characteristic that defines the nature of the offering. The special characteristics for services are intangibility, heterogeneity, inseparability and perishability Gabbott and Hogg (1998:26).

2.1.1. Intangibility

Services are performance that cannot be seen, smelled, tasted or touched Zeithaml and Bitner (2006:22). This makes the perception of a service highly subjective and an abstract concept for the customer. The inability to inspect or touch service means that in any pre-purchase situation the product remains abstract until it has been

consumed. Services are difficult to patent ,resulting in new service concepts being easily copied. The lack of tangible a product makes advertising difficult.

2.1.2. Inseparability

Service is sold first, then produced and consumed simultaneously, whereas goods are produced first, then sold and consumed Zeithaml and Bitner (2006:23). Gabbott and Hogg (1998:22) states that there are equipment based and people based services. Equipment based services ,such as ATM and telephone, deliver the same service to whoever consumes them. The opposite is true of people based service, where an involvement of a human service provider inevitably means that individual customer experience a variation in service delivery. The result of this variation is that people based services tend to be less standardized than equipment based services.

2.1.3. Variability

Variability is a function of human involvement in the delivery and consumption processes Gabbott and Hogg (1998:28). It refers to services that are delivered by humans and no two services are exactly the same. This depends on the service provider, as well as on when and how services are provided.

The implication of variability is that service delivery and meeting the need of the customer depend on the actions of the employee. There is no knowledge if the service which was delivered is what was planned and promoted Zeithaml and Bitner (2006:23).

2.1.4. Perishability

Perishability describes the real- time nature of the product Gabbott and Hogg (1998: 28). It means that the service cannot be stored, saved, resold or returned. Kotler (1996:60) states that perishability of the service is a problem when demand is steady. The main challenge is that when the service is improperly performed, it cannot be returned. As a

result ,strong strategies are necessary in case something goes wrong. For example, if the service cannot be repeated then apologies are the only means of recource for customer satisfaction.

2.2. Service Marketing Mix

Marketing mix are sets of tools that the organizations can utilize to shape the nature of the offering to customers Baker (2003:598). Service marketing mix (SMM) is a tool used in marketing for making characteristics service product offer to consumer. According to Zeithaml et al. (2013) marketing mix is defined the elements an organization controls that can be used to satisfy or communicate with customers. This services marketing mix is also called the 7P model, this service marketing mix strategy extends the original marketing mix model from four to seven elements, Rifai (2015).

Zeitmal and Bitner (2006:25) define the marketing mix as the elements an organization controls that can be used to satisfy or communicate with the customer. The key to long-term profitability for any professional firm is the creation of a service that satisfies the needs and wants of the clients and facilitates the exchange of those services in such a manner that provides value and satisfaction to the client. Marketing mix is a set of tools that can be used to create these services Kotler (1997:9). Traditional marketing mix consist of four Ps : product, price, promotion and place.

The notion of the mix means that all the variables are interrelated and depend on each other to some extent Zeitmal and Bitner (2006:25). Because of the nature of services, modification of the four Ps is necessary. Services are usually produced and consumed at the same time, customers often interact directly with the firm's personnel and are directly part of the service production process. Because services are intangible , customers often use people attributes such as attitudes of staff to help them understand the nature of the service experience. The three Ps added to traditional marketing mix , are people, physical evidence and process, (Table 2.1).

Table 1. Expanded Marketing Mix for services

Product	Place	Promotion	Price
Physical good features Quality level Accessories Packaging Warranties Product lines Branding	Channel type Exposure Intermediaries Outlet Locations Transportation Storage Managing channels	Promotion blend Salespeople Selection Training Incentives Advertising Media types Types of ads Sales promotion Publicity, Internet	Flexibility Price level Terms Differentiation Discounts Allowances
People	Physical Evidence	Process	
Employee Recruiting Training Motivation Rewards Teamwork Customers Education	Facility design Equipment Signage Employee dress Other tangibles Reports Business cards Statements	Flow of activities Standardized Customized Number of steps Simple Complex Customer involvement	

Source: Zietmal and Bitner (2006:26).

2.2.1. Product

Product is an organization's offering to potential customers and can be either tangible or intangible Jobber (1995:625). Product definition in the marketing mix covers items such as brand name, packages, quality design, features, sizes, product variety and warranties Kotler (2000:10).

Product decisions for services are not the same as goods, due to the fact that services are intangible. Palmer (2001:20) mentioned that the customer does not buy the product, they actually buy the benefits that the product provides. As a result, people, physical evidence, processes and elements play a vital role in influencing the customers' perception of service quality.

Service customers suffer a higher perceived risk in their decision- making. The more intangible the service the more it needs to be defined in terms of the process descriptions rather than a tangible description of outcome McColl-Kennedy et al. (1998:19).

2.2.2. Price

Price is the sum of money the customer has to pay to obtain the product, along with non -financial costs such as time, trouble and inconvenience Kotler et al. (2000:10). It is influenced by four factors:

1. The cost of producing a service.
2. The amount customers are willing to pay.
3. The price that competitors are charging and
4. The regulations imposed by the government which affect pricing McColl-Kennedy et al. (1998: 333).

The price that customers are willing to pay has the greatest impact on sales. When customers buy a product they exchange something of value to receive something of value. If the price is high, it could be perceived as high quality or high risk Kotler (2000:351).

Price is also a key marketing tool, for three reasons :

1. It acts as an indicator of perceived quality, since it is difficult to evaluate a service before purchase.
2. It is an important tool in controlling demand, since matching demand and supply is critical for services, as they cannot be stored.
3. Price sensitivity is an important segment variable that can be used with Services, since some customers are willing to pay higher prices than others Jobber (1995:678).

2.2.3. Place

Place means everything that the organization does to make its services available to target customers Kotler (2000:10). Distribution channels for services are more direct than those for physical goods, since services are consumed at the point of production Jobber (1995:658). Due to increase in technology, changes in distribution channels have made it possible to meet customer demands. For example, telephone or internet banking allows customers to conduct their business at their homes, 24 hours a day Woodruffe (1995:331).

2.2.4. Promotion

Promotion is a tool used as an ongoing process of communication between the organization and the customers. It consist of four elements :advertising, personal selling, sales promotion and public relations Kotler (1996:471).

Promotion adds significance to the services. There are a number of distinctive promotional needs to be considered Baker (2003:602):
1. Because of the intangible nature of the services, the promotion elements of the marketing mix will need to overcome customers' perceptions of high risk level during the buying process.
2. Since customers cannot sensibly evaluate intangible, high risk services without knowing the identity of the service provider, it is important to promote the service provider.
3. Where service production processes are inseparable from their consumption, visible production processes such as people are becoming part of the promotion effort.
4. Promotion of services is generally more constrained by the legal controls because there is a higher possibility of fraud due to the intangibility of the services.

2.2.5. People

People are human actors who play a vital role in service delivery and thus influence the buyer's perceptions Zeitmal and Bitner (2006:26). How people conduct themselves, their personal appearance and attitudes have an impact on the customer's perceptions. For professional services such as extension services, the provider is the service. That is why it is critical for organizations to set standards to improve the quality of the services provided by their employees and have measurement criteria to assess their performance, as training and control procedures aid in reducing the variability of the quality of the serviceprovided Jobber (1995:679).

2.2.6. Physical evidence

Physical evidence refers to the environment in which the service is delivered and where the firm and customer interact, as well as any tangible components that facilitate performance or communication of the service Zeitmal and Bitner (2006 :27).

Physical evidence sends a strong message about the organizational purpose and the nature of the service.

The service's nature means that customers cannot judge a service before it is consumed and this increases risk of purchase decision. Customers tend to look for clues to the likely quality of the service by inspecting tangible evidence such as brochures, letterheads, business cards and report formats Baker (2003:605).

2.2.7. Process

Process refers to actual procedures, mechanisms, and flow of activities by which the service is delivered Zeitmal and Bitner (2006:27). The direct involvement of customers in the production of most services, and the perishability of these services,

places a greater emphasis on the process of the transaction for the services, for example menus, promptness of service and waiting to pay the bill Jobber (1995:678).

The task for service marketers is that they must examine the processes involved in the service delivery to identify ways in which service may be better provided to a customer. This could include the removing of bottlenecks in order to streamline the service delivery process McColl-Kennedy et al. (1998:22).

It is important for organizations to understand the service chain, since all aspects of the service mix are part of the service encounters. Service chain are elements which affect the customer experience and finally the customer satisfaction. All elements of the marketing mix are equally important and the organization needs to have a proper marketing mix to ensure or achieve a competitive edge.

2.3. DAEA Extension Service Marketing Mix

The marketing mix is a set of tools available to an organisation to shape the nature of its offer to customers Palmer (2005:10). The four Ps of product, price, promotion and place have been found to be too limited in their application to services. As a result, seven Ps were proposed, with people, process and physical evidence being added.

2.3.1. Product

Lamb et al. (2004:222) explain that "a product is anything, both favourable and unfavourable that a person receives in an exchange- normally for money. It can be tangible (a pair of shoes), a service (a haircut), an idea ("do not litter") or any combination of these three. The DAEA extension services teach farmers about new farming ideas in their own farming needs and problems.

2.3.2. Price

The DAEA is a public sector. Services are delivered to farmers without a price being charged. The cost of providing the services is borne by the Department.

2.3.3. Promotion

The DAEA use a combination of public relations, advertising and personal selling in creating   a positive word of mouth message for its services. Events such as Imbizo,the Sunday slot on Radio Ukhozi, where the Ministry announces success stories   are means to convey a positive message about the department.

2.3.4. Place

There are more than three hundrend extensionists situated in the regional   and district offices throughout the province. The extension staff visit farmers in their wards on a daily basis and farmers are welcome to call the districts office for assistance.

2.3.5. People

Extension staff act as messengers between the Department   and   the   farming   communities. Extension staff have a high level of contact with farmers. The extention staff work closely together with Departmental scientists in ensuring that up-to-date information is transferred to farmers.

2.3.6. Physical evidence

Due to the nature of the extension services, the only physical evidence that most of the farmers are exposed to is contact with the extension staff, pamphlets and KZN motor vehicles.

2.3.7. Process

" No two service providers are the same "; service delivery can be varied because of the heterogeneity of the service Mclean (1994:199). In this context , the Department   produces the various training manuals that are written in IsiZulu and English, to assist in the transfer of technology to farmers. Ad hoc services are available, responding to the requests of farmers as they arise.

2.4. Relationship Marketing

Relationship marketing is a philosophy of carrying out business and strategic orientation that focuses on keeping and improving relationships with the current customers rather than on acquiring   new ones Zeithaml and Bitner (2006:177). Nevin (1995) also points out, the term relationship marketing has been used to reflect a variety of themes and perspectives. Some of these themes offer a narrow functional marketing perspective while others offer a   perspective   that   is   broad   and   somewhat paradigmatic in approach and orientation Sheth et al. (2015). The purpose of relationship marketing is to build a long -term relationship or connection between the organization and its customers, as well as developing brand and firm loyalty   Kurt (1998:151). A relationship marketing and service marketing mix can be used as a tool to shape the nature of the service offered to customers. Customer relationship is important, because it is cheaper to keep current customers than to attract new ones Zeithaml and Bitner (2006:178).

The following are the factors that influence the development of strong customer relationships :

1. The customer's overall evaluation of the quality of a firm's core service offering.

2. The switching barriers that the customer encounters in leaving the relationship.

3. The relationship bonds established with customers by the firm.

By establishing strong relationships with customers and by focusing on factors that have an impact on customer relationships, the organization will accurately understand customers' expectations over time Zeitmal and Bitner (2006:207).

2.5. Service Quality

What is service quality? According to Zeithaml and Bitner (2006:108), service quality is a focused

evaluation that reflects a customer's perception of reliability, responsiveness, empathy, assurance and tangibles.

Why do customers prefer one organisation over another? It is because the one organisation meets their needs in some way: ease of use or ability to do what it promises to do. Service quality is considered as a viable strategy for marketers who want to differentiate their service offerings, develop customer values and satisfy customer needs Ozment and Morash (1994:352).

If all other factors are constant, price is the deciding factor. If there is little difference in price, quality will decide and if price and quality are the same, service quality wins Morea (1996 :18).

2.5.1. Service quality dimensions

Research indicates that customers judge service quality using many criterias. There are five dimensions of service quality namely:

Reliability
Reliability is defined as the ability to deliver the service as promised. This means that organization honours its promises, delivers the service right first time, keeps records accurately, bills accurately and delivers timeosly. Reliability is the most important dimension to the customers. All organizations need to be aware of customers' expectation of reliability Zeithaml and Bitner (2006:117).

Responsiveness
Responsiveness is the willingness or the readiness of the employees to provide the service. It involves:
Promptness in dealing with the customers' requests or complains.
Calling the customer back immediately.
Assisting in solving the customers' problems.
Organizations are advised to view the process of service delivery from the customers' point of vie rather than the from organizations point of view. By doing this the organization will excel as the provider of quality service and responsiveness Zeithaml and Bitner (2006:117).

Assurance
Assurance is defined as the employees' knowledge and courtesy and their ability to inspire trust and confidence. It is a critical driver of quality, especially of services which customers perceive as high risk, such as insurance, medical and legal services Zeithaml and Bitner (2006:118).

Empathy
Empathy is defined as the caring , individualized attention that the organization provides its customers. Organizations who value empathy, call their customers by name and establish a relationship that reflects their personal knowledge of the customer requirements Zeithaml and Bitner (2006:120).

Tangibles
This is the appearance of the physical facilities, equipment and staff. Tangibles provide image of the services, especially to first time users. Tangibles can be used by the organization to
Enhance their image.

Provide continuity.
Signal quality to customers.
Tangibles can be used with another dimension, for example providing efficient service and comfort Zeithaml and Bitner (2006:120).

2.5.2. Measuring service quality

One of the first measures to be developed to measure service quality is SERVQUAL survey . SERVQUAL scale involves a survey consisting of 21 service attributes, grouped into the five service quality dimensions as discussed above. The survey ask customers two different ratings for each attribute, one representing corresponding expectation and the other representing corresponding perception. Negative differences between the expectation and perception inform the organization about their deficiencies and identify areas that need improvements, whereas positive differences indicate that the organization is exceeding customer expectations.

The SERVQUAL instrument can be used in commercial and public sector organizations Parasuraman et al. (1988:167). The relative importance of each dimension to customers can be limited to industry, individual business unit, branch and department.

2.5.3. The gaps model of service quality

The gaps model of service quality serves as a framework for service organizations attempting to improve the quality of service and service marketing. The gaps model is based on the idea that customers evaluate services by comparing their expectations of what will happen during the service delivery with their perception of the performance of the service. Zeithaml and Bitner (2006:33) have identified four potential gaps which can exist in the process of service develivery.

Gap 1: Not knowing what customers expect

This gap is between the customer's expectation of superior service and the management' perception of customer's expectation Gabbott and Hogg (1998:106).

The main cause of this gap is that management lacks accurate understanding of what the customers expect. This occurs when there is :
Lack of interaction between management and customers.
Inadequate use of market research.
Lack of encouragement to listen to customer complaints.
Gap 1 can be minimized by implementation of multiple market research strategy with an aim of understanding customers needs and by building a long- term customer relationship Zeithaml and Bitner (2006:201).

Gap 2: Not having the right service quality designs and standards

This is the difference between the organization's understanding of customer expectations and development of customer driven service design and

standards Zeithaml and Bitner (2006:38). Causes of this gap could be:
Poor service design.
Lack of customer-driven service standard.

Failure to develop tangibles in line with customer expectations.
Gap 2 can be minimized by designing services without oversimplification, incompleteness, subjectivity and bias.

Figure 1. Gaps Model of Service Quality
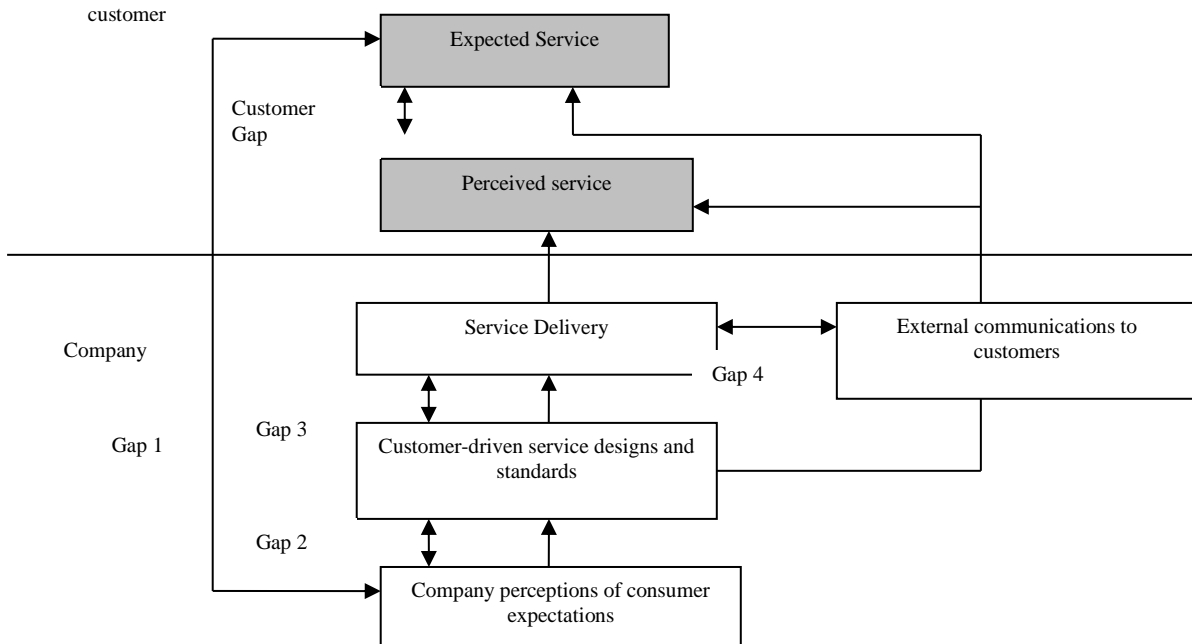
Source: Zeithaml and Bitner (2006:33)

Gap 3: Not delivering to service designs and standards

This gap is between the service quality specification and service delivery Gabbott and Hogg (1998:106). Even when guidelines for performing services are well strucutred and exist, high-quality service performance is not guaranteed. It is crucial that standards be backed by appropriate resources in the form of; people, systems and technology. The human error and mechanical breakdown cannot be ignored. Adequately trained staff are needed to deliver the quality that is necessary.

Gap 4: Not matching performance to promises

This is the gap between the service delivered and the service provider's external communications Zeithaml and Bitner (2006:42). When service quality is not delivered as promised, broken promises occur. The causes of broken promises could be:
Absence of a strong internal marketing programme
Over-promising in advertising
Differences in policies and procedures across business units.
Gap 4 can be minimized by increasing horizontal communication by opening channels of communication between the human resource and operation, to promote understanding between the relevant business units.
Organizations should develop communications that deal with the quality dimension and features that are most crucial to the customer and accurately

reflect what customers actually receive in the service encounter Zeithaml and Bitner (2006:43).

2.6. Customer Satisfaction

What is customer satisfaction? Morea (1996:17) explains customer satisfaction as a "means of meeting not only the wants and needs of our customer, but the customer expectation as well".

Brink and Berndt (2004:315) describe customer satisfaction as "the degree to which an organization's product or service performance matches up to the expectations of the customer ".

Cant et al. (2006:315) define customer satisfaction as "an outcome of a consumption activity or experience and it can represent a process".

Despite plethora of research on customer satisfaction, non unanimous definitions of customer satisfaction have been developed, yet inspite of its antecedents and consequences. Many definitions are either basically or to some extent, not consistent with one another, even all of these have similar components, Butt et al. (2015). Customer satisfaction is considered as a response which the customers gives after evaluating and is expressed during the purchase consumption process. Customer satisfaction with respect to service quality has been found to significantly contribute to customer loyalty in service industries (Kitapci et al. 2013; Butt et al. 2015).

The focal point here is that customers are the only true assets of an organization and customer satisfaction is the only justification for an organization's existence.

2.6.1. Factors that shape customer satisfaction

The factors that shape customer satisfaction are product or service features, perceptions of the products or service quality and price. Personal factors such as customer's mood or emotional state and situational factors such as family member opinions will also shape satisfaction Zeithaml et al. (2006:111).

Product and service features

The customer's evaluation of the product or service features has a significant impact on customer satisfaction. For example, important features in a hotel include room comfort and cleaniness, friendliness of staff, access to golf facilities, beaches, mountains, room price etc. Zeithaml et al. (2006:111) states that customers will make trade-offs among different service features, for instance price compared with courtesy of staff compared with customization depending on the kind and the nature of service being evaluated .

During a customer satisfaction survey, most organisations will determine, through focus groups, what the dominant features and attributes are for their services and then measures these features ,as well as overall service satisfaction.

Customer emotions

A positive (happy) or negative (sad) state of mind has an impact on how one feels or responds to the service received or experienced. The customer can either overreact or respond badly to any minor problem. The point is, positive emotions can develop customer satisfaction, whereas the negative emotions can destroy customer satisfaction. In 2007, Han conducted a study of the hospitality industry. He found that negative emotion had a greater influence on the customer satisfaction and customer repeat visit intentions than positive emotions.

Attributions for service success or failure

Attribution theory means how people explain things. This theory suggests that when an outcome is not as expected, people tend to look for reasons. Their assessments on why things turned out this way can influence their satisfaction, for example, if a farmer has planted a new maize cultivar and it has disappointed him by achieving a lower yield than expected. The farmer may think that the cultivar that was recommended by extension officer was not suitable for his/her climatic conditions. The farmer makes many external attributions Zeithaml et al. (2006:112).

Perceptions of equity or fairness

There are questions that arise in customers' minds regarding fairness or equity. "Have I been treated fairly compared with other customers? Did the other customers get a better attention, a better price or superior service quality?" Notions of fairness are central to customers' perceptions of satisfaction with products or services Zeithaml et al. (2006:112).

Reference group, family members and co-workers

Customer satisfaction is often influenced by other people, for instance, with a new maize cultivar on the market, farmers will be influenced not only by individuals' personal experiences with the new seed itself, but also by what other farmers say about it on farmers' day, how others feel about it and how widely it is adopted by the organization.

2.6.2. Steps to attain customer satisfaction

There are five steps that assist in the attainment of customer satisfaction:
- communicate with your customer
- manage the overall experience
- handle difficult situations with empathy and in a dignified manner
- cultivate a service culture with employees and task teams and
- learn how to implement and control service processes.

2.7. Difference Between Service Perception and Service Expectation

Service perceptions are generated during and after exposure to the service, whereas service, expectation is usually generated at the beginning of the services Brink and Bernt (2004:59).

Expectation changes from person to person and culture to culture, meaning what is expected today is not the same as what is expected in the future. This influences the perceptions of the customers. Customers perceive services in terms of the quality of the service provided and the level of the satisfaction attained. Organizations can differentiate themselves with respect to service quality and improved customer satisfaction.

3. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

3.1. Research Design

A descriptive study was undertaken to measure extension service quality delivery within the uMngungundlovu District. Descriptive research occurs where a specific situation is studied either to see if it gives rise to any theories or to see if existing general theories are borne out by the specific solution.

The advantages of descriptive research is that it provides information about the relevant characteristics of the study group and allows associations among those characteristics Parasuraman (1991:135).

3.2. Research Instrument

According to Kotler (1994:41), most business companies conduct customer satisfaction surveys using questionnaires. Zeithaml and Bitner (2003:135) state that service quality is generally abstract and thus dimensions of services are best captured by surveys that measure customer evaluation of services. One such survey instrument developed to measure service quality is SERVQUAL scale Zeithaml and Bitner (2003:135).The SERVQUAL scale was first developed in 1988 and has since undergone numerous improvements. There are now different formats widely in use in commercial and public sector organizations. It consists of 21 service attributes, which are grouped into the five service

quality dimensions (i.e. reliability, responsiveness, assurance, empathy and tangibles) Zeithaml and Bitner (2003:135, 138).

The SERQUAL survey questionnaire is structured in such a way that two different ratings are provided for each attribute or dimension of service quality. One rating reflects the level of service clients would expect from service providers in the sector and the other reflects their perception of the service delivered by a specific service provider within that sector. The difference between the expectation and perception ratings constitutes a quantified measure of service quality. The SERVQUAL predetermined survey questionnaire was used for collecting and analyzing the primary data for this study.

Discussion of the questionnaire

The SERVQUAL questionnaire has two sets of 22 questions each. Section A deals with the customers' expectations of the quality of the extension service that best oganisation should offer. Section B deals with the cutomer service perception received from uMngungundlovu District Extension Services. A five-point Likert format, ranging from 1 to 5, was used.

There are five dimensions of service quality being measured :
- Empathy- the provision of caring individual attention (statements 1-4)
- Responsiveness – the willingness to help the customer (statements 5-9)
- Assurance – the knowledge and courtesy of the employees (statements 10-14)
- Reliability – the ability to perform the promised service reliably and accurately (statements 15-18)
- Tangibles –the appearance of physical facilities, equipment, communication materials (19-22)

Questions 1-5 define background information of a customer.

3.3. Sample Design

The process of selecting a sample involves seven stages Zikmund (1995:417) These are discussed as follows:

3.3.1. Defining the target population

Zikmund (1995:417) states that it is vital to carefully define the target population, so that proper sources from which the data are to be collected can be identified. The target population for this research were farming communities in the uMngungundlovu District Municipality. Since it is impractical to obtain information from the entire target population a specific sample was selected to actually participate in the surve.

3.3.2. Select a sampling Frame

According to Zikmund (1995 :418), the "sampling frame is a list of elements from which the sample may be drawn." This research focused on the farming community that have receive extension services from DAEA under uMngungundlovu District Municipality. The Umngungundlovu District Municipality consists of seven local municipalities:
- Richmond
- uMshwati

- Camperdown
- uMngeni
- uMsunduzi
- Impendle
- Impofana

The above local municipalities were believed to be representative of the farming communities living in the uMngungundlovu District Municipality.

3.3.3. Sampling method chosen for the research

There are two types of sampling method, probability and non - probability sampling methods. Probability sampling is a sampling technique in which every member of the population will have a known, non-zero probability of selection . Non - probability sampling is a sampling technique where the probability of any particular member of the population being chosen is unknown Zikmund (1995:423).

A non- probability sampling method was selected for the purpose of this study. There are four types of non-probability samples: convenience sampling, judgment or purposive sampling, quota sampling and snowball sampling Zikmund (1995:424).

Respondents were selected purposively by extension officials in the areas where they performed their duties. With purposive sampling, the sample obtained is regarded as non-representative of the relevant population, but was typical and ensured that the research issues were addressed from different perspectives. Purposive sampling is also less complicated and more economical in terms of finance and time spent Welman and Kruger (2001).

3.3.4. Sampling Size

With the help of Extension Officers from the KZN Department of Agriculture and Environmental Affairs, farmers who received extension services were identified. Farmers were selected purposively by Extension Officials who know the areas where they performed their duties.

To gain entry to the local municipalities, the researcher contacted the District Heads where research was conducted and requested that the Extension Officers be part of research.

The research was carried out by interviewing 160 participants at seven local municipalities (Representative sample = 160, population = 280) Refer to Table 1. This sample was found to provide adequate representation of Umngungundlovu farming communities.

Table 2. Determining sample size

Population (N)	Representative sample(n)
40	36
80	66
120	92
160	113
200	132
240	148
280	162

Source: Krejcie and Morgan (1970:608)

3.4. Data Collection

In order to collect the data the researcher met with Extension Officers from seven municipalities. The aim of the meeting was to introduce the study and help Extension Officers gain a clear understanding of their responsibilities within the study. Extension staff were responsible for inviting farmers to participate and introducing the researcher in their wards. The researcher handed out the questionnaire to the farmers. Farmers who could not read and write were assisted by the researcher and extension officers . The questionnaire was to be completed by farming community which had received agricultural services from the DAEA.

3.5. Data Analysis

Data was collected using questionnaires. The tool used for the research was quantitative and allowed the researcher to collect a large quantity of data from a sizeable population. Data was collected and coded, entered into a spreadsheet (Microsoft Excel) and analyzed using the Statistical Package for Social Sciences (SPSS) computer programme. From the SPSS analysis , tables, means, and frequencies in percentages were drawn.

4. RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS

Determining the service perceptions of the farming communities with regards to extension service delivery.

Perception is our sensory experience of the world around us and involves both the recognition of environmental stimuli and actions in response to these stimuli. Through the perceptual process, we gain information concerning properties and elements of the environment that are critical to our survival. Perception not only creates our experience of the world around us; it allows us to act within our environment Van Wager (2008 :1)

4.1. Perception Concerning Empathy

Giving the farmers individual attention has the highest score (4.74) in this dimension. This statement proves to be extension's strongest point and is probably the key to customer satisfaction. Solomon and Stuart (1997:380) state that people like to feel that they are receiving personal attention and this enhances the quality of the service in the customer's mind.

The lowest recorded value was 4.14 for the statements related to the business hours of the extension service. Respondents raised concerns that when they try to reach the extension staff, especially during the weekend , their cellphones are off. The department needs to address this issue by providing the official with company phones.

The overall average score for this dimension is 4.57 and this represents the second lowest score of the five service quality dimensions.

4.2. Perception Concerning Responsiveness

The highest average perception on responsiveness dimension was 4.78, related to the willingness of staff to help. This indicates that customers regards extension staff as friendly and helpful.

The lowest average score of 4.41 was recorded for statements that the extension offices are slow to respond to issues. The Department needs to take this statement into consideration as the responsiveness perception diminishes when customers wait for assistance. To excel in responsiveness dimension, company must be certain to view the process of service delivery from a customer's point of view Zeithaml and Bitner (1996:121).

The overall average for this dimension was 4.68 and represents the second highest score of the five service quality dimensions.

4.3. Perception Concerning Assurance

The highest average perception on assurance dimension was 4.77, related to the knowledge the extension staff have. This indicates that farmers have a positive experience when dealing with the extension staff as far as knowledge and skill is concerned. Blem (1996:33) states that customers jugde an organisation by its staff.

The overall average for this dimension was 4.69 and this is the highest average of all dimensions.

4.4. Perception Concerning Reliability

The highest average perception on reliability dimension was 4.75. This was recorded for the statement that information provided by Extension Officers are easy to understand. This indicates that the respondents like the fact that the extension information is easy to use .

The statement that received the lowest average of all the 22 statement is that extension is a good investment of public funds.

The overall average for this dimension was 4.47. It is the lowest average score of all five dimensions. The Department needs to be aware of customers' expectations on relaibility. Firms that do not provide the core service that customers think they are buying fail their customers in the most direct way. Of all the five dimensions of the service quality, relaibility has shown to be the most important determinant of perceptions of service quality among U.S. customers Zeithaml and Bitner (1996:119) .

4.5. Perception Concerning Tangibility

The highest average perception on tangible dimension was 4.79. This was recorded for the statement that extension materials (training modules, pamphlets) which are associated with the service are visually appealing. This is the highest of all 22 statements, indicating that farmers are satisfied with the extension materials. The training modules are designed is such a way that even an illerate person can see and learn from them. These training modules are full of pictures. We know the saying that a pictures is worth a thousand words.

Tangibles are often used by service companies to enhance their image Zeithaml and Bitner (1996:122) . The overall average for this dimension was 4.58.

4.6. Determinining the Service Expectations of the Farming Communities with Regard to Extension Service Delivery

Zeithaml and Bitner (1996:76)explained that customer expectations are beliefs concerning service delivery that function as standards against which performance is judged.

Expected service is a critical component of the perceived service quality and is seen as being influenced by word of mouth communication, past experience with the business and by the personal believes, attitudes and values of the customer Muller et al. (1994:7).

4.6.1. Expectation concerning emphathy

The highest expectation on empathy dimension was 4.97, related to staff having the best interests of the customers at heart. This indicates that the customers expect extension staff to treat them with diginity.

The overall average score for this dimension was 4.86 and is rated fourth highest of the average five dimensions.

4.6.2. Expectation concerning responsiveness

Responsiveness is the willingness to help customers Bergman and Klefsjo (1994:267). It concerns the readiness of the employees to provide service and involves timeous of service, calling the customer back and giving prompt service Parasuraman et al. (1988:47)

The highest expectation on the responsiveness dimension was 4.97, related to the ability of extension to help customers to make informed decisions.

The overall average score for this dimension was 4.93. This is the same as the expectation score related to the statement that the best Extension Officer will be quick to respond to issues. No business can afford to keep the customer waiting and farming community expects extention officers to respond to their needs quickly.

4.6.3. Expectations concerning assurance

Assurance dimension includes competence, courtesy, credibility and security Bergman and Klefsjo (1994:269) :
- Competence is the possessing of the required skills and knowledge to perform the service.
- Courtesy refers to the supplier's behaviour, for example, consideration, politeness and kindness.
- Credibility means trustworthiness, honesty of the service provider.
- Security means freedom from danger, risk and doubt.

The highest expectation on the assurance dimension was 4.94, related to extension help in solving farmer's problems. This implies that farming communities have high expectations with regards to the ability of the extension staff to solve their problems.

The overall average score for this dimension was 4.92. This is the second highest score of all the five dimensions of service quality.

4.6.4. Expectation concerning reliability

Bergman and Klefsjo (1994:267) state that reliabilty involves the consistency of the performance and dependability, i.e. punctuality and the correctness of the service information.

The highest expectation on reliability dimension was 4.92, related to the best extension officer never too busy to solve farmers problems.

The overall average score for this dimension was 4.83. Although this is the lowest score for all five quality dimensions, it is still a high score.

4.6.5. Expectation concerning tangibility

Tangibles refer to the physical environment in which the service is presented, i.e the organisation, the equipment , the personnel and their clothing Bergman and Klefsjo (1994:267).

The highest expectation on the tangible dimension was 4.96, related to extension office being approachable. Much the service quality is realised when the farmer and the extension staff meet face to face. This is called "the moment of truth" "or" "moment of possibilities", since the supplier can convince the customer of service excellence. The Department must consider setting a dress code to ensure uniformity, as employee image is part of the custmer's impression of the quality of the service.

The overall average score for this dimension was 4.89. This is the third highest score of the five dimensions and does not seem to be as the most critical element for farming communities, the reason being very few farmers visit the local office. The extension staff visit farmers in their ward of operation, using KZN or subsidized transport.

4.7. Determining the SERVQUAL Gaps that Impair Extension Service Delivery

A good service quality is one which matches or exceeds customer expectations. Judgement of high and low service quality depend on how cutomers perceive the actual service performance in the context of what they expected Bergman and Klefsjo (1994:274).

The average gap score between the extension service perception and expectation for each of the service quality dimensions are empathy (-0.23), responsiveness (-0.25), assurance (-0.23), reliability (-0.36) and tangibles (-0.31). There is a narrow gap between the extension services'perception and expectation for all five dimensions. The negative difference implies that the expectation scores have exceeded the perception scores. This calls for some level of improvement.

The results have shown that the customers perceive that they receive superior service from the extension staff. However the negative differences need to be eliminated to exceed the expectations of customers.

5. RECOMMENDATIONS

Improve communication modes between the field officers and the farmers.

The study revealed that farmers wait for too long before they receive assistance from the field workers, the governement should solve this problem by putting modern communication modes in place that will shorten the waiting period for the farmers.

The field workers should respond to the problems of the farmers with haste.

The farmers complained that field workers take too long before they can respond to the problems being faced by the farmers. An improvement in this area will lead to more confidence in the field workers by the farmers and this will improve the relationship between the two parties.

CONCLUSION

Nowadays government organisations are operating in a new environment of accountability. Funders want more than accurate record keeping and summary of what was done with their appropriations. They want information that communicates value of programs. Therefore, more attention is being paid to customer satisfaction as funding decisions are made. Even when an organisation meets its performance goals, few taxpayers want to finance an organisation if its programs are viewed as irrelevant or officials are perceived ineffective.

The major aim of this study was to measure farming community perceptions and expectations of quality of extension services rendered by Department of Agriculture within UMngungundlovu District. Findings from this study indicates that customers judge service quality based on multiple factors such as:-

- Emphathy- the provision of caring individual attention
- Responsiveness – the willingness to help the customer
- Assurrance – the knowledge and courtesy of the employees
- Reliability – the ability to perform the promised service reliably and accurately
- Tangibles –the appearance of physical facilities, equipment, communication materaials

These five dimensions of customer satisfaction were used as framework for both the collection and presentation of data. The results of the study have shown that all five dimensions of service quality are significantly important as far as extension work is concerned in the Department.

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