Assessing service quality in public and private fitness centers in Greece

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ASSESSING SERVICE QUALITY IN PUBLIC AND PRIVATE FITNESS CENTERS IN GREECE

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The existence of marketing is based on the satisfaction of customers. In service industries’ where the business environment is highly competitive, the quality of service delivered is as strong element as the service itself, which fulfills customer satisfaction and therefore, purchasing intentions (Cronin & Taylor, 1992). Customer satisfaction and service quality are concepts that ultimately lead to customer retention and income generation, where the existence of business is based.

Although service quality is one of the most published topics in marketing literature the last fifteen years, many issues related to the construct remain unresolved. Researchers did not come in a consensus about a single service quality definition, or they are unwilling to suggest one (Jensen & Markland). This mainly happened because of the unique characteristics of services (intangibility, heterogeneity, inseparability and inconsistency), and the fact that the “word easily takes on personal meaning and in so doing looses focus in terms of its conceptualization (Christopher et al. 1991). Most researchers seem to agree that service quality is a comparison to excellence in service encounters by the customers (Rust & Oliver, 1994). Zeithaml (1987) stated that perceived service quality is the consumer’s judgment about an entity’s overall excellence or superiority. According to Parasuraman et al. (1988) consumers’ perceptions of quality stems from a comparison of expectations and perceptions of service performance.

Service quality has been a fruitful area for research in almost every part of the service industry were researchers have examined numerous aspects of the concept, such as the role of expectations, the validity of the gap model, its relationship to other theoretical concepts (i.e. satisfaction, value), and its structural and contextual stability among others. Recently the quality movement hit the fitness industry as well. Managers started to focus on customer-oriented programs, and to the improvement of the quality of their services, in order to satisfy customers’ needs and wants. The increased interest of sport center managers in service quality, is mainly due to the increased competition among health and fitness firms, and to the appearance of more complex and demanding customers. In Greece, the private sport centers consist of an estimated 600 business, with 165,000 customers and 2,700 employees, generating 12.6 billion drachmas in income per year (Center, 1996). In Greece, the private sport centers consist of an estimated 600 business, with 165,000 customers and 2,700 employees, generating 12.6 billion drachmas in income per year (C.P.E.R., 1996).

Following findings from the field of services marketing (Carman, 1990; Cronin & Taylor, 1992), sport managers and researchers attempted to develop context specific instruments, in order to measure service
quality in sports settings. Kim and Kim (1995) mentioned that sport centers possess unique characteristics that warrant a specific approach to measure service quality.

In order to measure service quality in Greek fitness centers, Kim and Kim’s (1995) QUESQ instrument was selected. QUESQ was selected because it is an instrument designed to measure service quality specifically in fitness centers. A review of the service quality literature indicated that service quality dimensions are not generic, but rather context-specific. QUESQ contained 45 items in pairs (the first part measured the desirability of each item and the second the level of service delivered by the fitness centers). These items represented 12 service quality dimensions. The instrument translated into Greek by using the back to back method (Brislin, 1970). Following the translation process, QUESQ’s Greek version was content validated by a panel of five experts (managers of sport centers and service quality researchers) (Nachmias & Nachmias, 1987). This process concluded with the exclusion of two statements: “Community activities” and “Play, goal and differentiation”. The instrument was further content validated by 18 undergraduate students. This process revealed no suggestions for changes. The questionnaire delivered to 500 Greek customers of six sport centers located in Athens, Greece. Two centers were public and four private. The return questionnaires represented a rate of 69.2%. The sample consisted by a 4 to 6 ratio of male vs. female customers.

Overall scale’s reliability was .94. As results indicated that Greek customers of sport centers perceived “cleanliness” as the most important service quality aspect (mean 4.81, SD .49), followed by “employees’ adequate knowledge and skills” (mean 4.64, SD .62), “employees responsiveness” (mean 4.60, SD .65), “employees courtesy” (mean 4.52, SD .72) and “emergency procedures” (mean 4.52, SD .78). The less important quality aspects for Greek customers were: “provision of necessities” (mean 2.87, SD 1.27), “non member guests may be invited” (mean 3.26 SD 1.33), “family programs” (mean 3.50 SD 1.23), “maintenance of good customer records” (mean 3.59, SD 1.12), and “access to drinks” (mean 3.65, SD 1.11). In order to measure if sport centers are meeting desired service standards and following Kim and Kim’s procedure the mean of each item’s difference scores were subjected to a t-test. Findings indicated that generally the fitness centers had good performance. Only eight service aspects were statistically lagging customers’ standards.

References


