

# **BRINGING CULTURAL DIVERSITY INTO A SERVICE MARKETING COURSE: A SERVQUAL EXERCISE**

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## **Abstract**

Service quality is a dominant theme within services marketing courses. Indeed, services educators allocate considerable portions of their course content to defining service quality (Zeithaml, Bitner, & Gremler, 2009), discussing its underlying dimensions, measuring these dimensions with the SERVQUAL scale (Zeithaml, Berry, & Parasuraman, 1990), exploring how firms may respond to service quality problems and discussing how to implement recovery solutions (Lovelock, Wirtz, & Chew, 2009). Within these service quality class discussions, services are understood as being time-perishable, intangible experiences that are performed by a service provider to a customer (Spohrer & Maglio, 2008). Hence, the onus of providing service quality to customers, as well as to implementing service recovery strategies, is deemed by scholars to rest solely with the service provider. Thus, services texts tend to portray service providers as being champions of egalitarian service quality, eager to offer reliability to all their customers and to disaggregate service quality problems, and to implement corrective actions.

Although many service providers are supporters of their customers' welfare, examples in which service providers act as discriminatory agents against their customers are found in the services literature (Rosenbaum & Montoya, 2007); yet, are absent from services textbooks (e.g., Lovelock et al., 2010; Zeithaml, Bitner, & Gremler, 2009) and hence, most classroom discussions. Additionally, the impact of other customers on negatively influencing another customers' service quality experience is often muted in major services textbooks and is absent from prominent service quality frameworks. That is, the SERVQUAL scale (Zeithaml et al., 1990), the service-profit chain (Heskett, et. al., 1994), the return on marketing scale (Rust, Lemon, & Zeithaml, 2007) all emphasize the role of service providers in affecting a customer's perception of service quality, satisfaction, loyalty, or lifetime value, while looking askance at the role of other customers' in affecting a customer's service experience.

Although some service textbooks give credence to the fact that other customers may be repositories of life-enhancing social support for other customers, especially among those who patronize commercial hang-outs, or "third-places" (Zeithaml et al., 2009), in-depth discussions

regarding how other customers often negatively influence a customer's service experience are absent from services texts and classroom discussions. That is, although students learn that customers affect each other within service settings, examples regarding how customers purposefully, and without reason, often destroy other customers' service experiences are absent from key marketing texts and service quality frameworks.

The goal of this article is to address these shortcomings in services marketing textbooks and classroom discussions by providing service, as well as, retailing educators with a cultural diversity exercise that educators may employ in undergraduate, graduate and executive MBA courses.

### The Service Quality Exercise

This service quality fills a gap in service quality discussions and provides an opportunity for students to discuss that customers' service experiences will vary based upon their racial, ethnic, sexual orientation, age, and physical appearance/handicap characteristics, and that stigmatized, minority, or marginalized consumer groups are routinely subjected to marketplace discrimination. For instance, Table 1 illustrates 25 different types of customers within service settings whom are likely to experience inferior service quality from both service providers and employees, albeit, within a North American context.

Prior to implementing the exercise, the professor should write each example from Table 1 on an index card. The exercise commences with the professor dividing students in groups of two. Next, the professor asks each student groups to select one card. After all students have selected a card, the professor begins the lecture by telling students that they will be asked to accomplish four tasks about the customer and setting that is illustrated on the index card. The first question asks students to list the types of discriminatory behaviors that other customers may direct toward the customer. The second question asks them to list of discriminatory behaviors that will be directed toward the customer from employees. The third question asks that students provide solutions regarding customer-to-customer discrimination. The fourth question asks students to provide solutions regarding employee-to-customer discrimination. Professors should reassure students that there are no correct or incorrect answers, and that they should answer the questions in an open and honest manner. Students often need assurance that "nothing" is an option pertaining to solving customer-to-customer discrimination.

Table 1 Examples of marginalized, minority, or stigmatized consumers within service settings

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1. Three African-American males shopping for clothing in a high-end specialty store, like Neiman- Marcus or Saks Fifth Avenue.
  2. An obese person sitting in coach on a full airplane.
  3. A wheel-chair bound college student in a campus bar on a busy weekend.
  4. A Muslim family in traditional dress on a tour bus in New York City.
  5. Lesbian partners at a hospital in a state that bans same-sex marriage.
  6. A family from Mexico, who speak poor English, in the emergency room of a hospital.
  7. A senior citizen with a bladder control issue who is at the Chicago Public Library.
  8. A person living with cancer, and showing visible signs of chemotherapy with hair loss, at a busy restaurant on a weekend day.
  9. A mentally challenged consumer purchasing a used car.
  10. A gay male couple shopping for a mattress together at Macy's or Sears.
  11. A Down's Syndrome child in the play area of McDonald's.
  12. A transgender female to male purchasing a suit at Macy's or Nordstrom's.
  13. A transgender male to female purchasing cosmetics at a department store.
  14. A Caucasian male asking for service in an African-American barbershop.
  15. An overweight couple walking in a mall.
  16. An interracial couple enjoying a romantic Valentine's Day dinner in Alabama.
  17. A group of Japanese tourists, who do not understand English well, at Walt Disney World in Orlando, Florida.
  18. A male in his twenties with tattoos on his neck and hands shopping in a specialty store.
  19. A woman in a fur-coat and wearing a sparkling diamond ring shopping at Wal-Mart.
  20. A gay male in a straight bar vs. a straight man in a gay bar.
  21. Muslim males with beards boarding a plane from Newark to Chicago.
  22. Vegan students at a university cafeteria, which is located in a rural, Midwestern town.
  23. Senior citizens shopping at Abercrombie & Fitch.
  24. A group of two African-American females and three African-American males at a restaurant like Cracker Barrel.
  25. An overweight female lifting weights at a gym.
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### The Emergent Service Quality Frameworks

The discussion concerning customer-to-customer discrimination exposes the reality that service quality is not universal or necessarily guaranteed to consumers in any manner. Indeed,

students often accept many forms of inter-customer discrimination as being natural and generally expected. That is, many students willingly discuss that they expect African-American males, obese consumers, and children with Down's syndrome will receive negative glances, rude gestures, and avoidance from other customers. This represents a learning moment in the sense that students should now realize that service quality can often be destroyed by other customers, the difficulty in measuring this service failure, and the fact that stigmatized, minority, and marginalized consumers often have unpleasant service experiences.

Given that students will have discussed service quality prior to the exercise, they may assume that all service providers are dedicated to providing their customers with reliability, responsiveness, empathy, assurance, and favorable tangible items. Yet, as students discuss how service employees may easily alter their service quality in response to disliking customers, or with being uncomfortable with them, students soon realize that service employees are often discriminatory agents instead of service champions.

#### Conclusion

Students entering careers as managers in service settings may fail to fully recognize the extent to which service quality is not being equally afforded to all customers. Although prior to this exercise, students may believe they are aware of discrimination, many admit were not fully aware of its reach and impact, or have had the opportunity to discuss it with their peers:

*It made me realize by discussion and listening to people's stories that discrimination and service challenges related to that still happen to this day.*

*I felt that way for a long time, but could never express this so clearly in words.*

This paper addresses this void not only in services marketing but also in retailing, hospitality, and fashion courses by offering educators an easy-to-implement, active learning exercise that shows students how many consumers actually fail to obtain quality service in the marketplace. Therefore, this exercise has profound transformative potential for the marketplace in general, as managers often act role-models for front-line employees. Perhaps, the marketplace has the potential to deliver service quality to all customers equally; it just requires diversity training.