

January 2006

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Recommended Citation

Tobin, Eric R. and Huffman, Lynn M. (2006) "Examining the Impact of Service Times on Overall Guest Satisfaction Perception in the Casual Dining Environment," *Hospitality Review*: Vol. 24 : Iss. 1 , Article 5.

Available at: <http://digitalcommons.fiu.edu/hospitalityreview/vol24/iss1/5>

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Abstract

A mystery shopper study was used to examine the influence of service times on customer satisfaction. The impact of management emphasis on service quality was also examined. In the restaurants studied, service time influenced customer satisfaction. Management attention to service time improved performance in direct relationship to the level of emphasis.

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By Eric R. Tobin, and Lynn M. Huffman

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Introduction

In today's increasingly competitive restaurant industry, many establishments have been forced to reconsider all of the elements that contribute to customer satisfaction as a means of attempting to cultivate a loyal following. Traditionally one of the most salient determiners of overall customer satisfaction has been maintaining a reasonable service time. This factor has become much more important amidst the growing popularity of restaurants that focus on providing a casual dining environment. As aspects of the dining experience such as sophisticated cuisine and refined atmosphere have diminished in their value to the average customer, the rapidity and timeliness of the service time have increased in their significance (Johnson, 1987).

Service Quality

There is a broad consensus among hospitality industry analysts that overall perception of service quality is one of the most important elements in determining customer satisfaction. A particular establishment's ability to maintain minimal service times is a key component of perceived service quality (Yasin and Zimmerer, 1995).

Yasin and Zimmerer (1995) examined the use of benchmarking in developing standards of service quality within an organization in the context of the hospitality industry. Noting that increased competition has raised the stakes on developing a distinctive service environment as a means of ensuring repeat patronage, hospitality establishments must dedicate themselves to ensuring quality on a continual basis.

Within the hospitality industry, and particularly within the context of intangible components such as quality service, it is important for establishments to assess themselves and assess the achievements of competitors on a regular basis. The benchmarking process consists of making a survey of one's competitors and assessing which of them exhibits superior achievement in the many aspects that comprise the good or service being offered. Through this assessment process, as well as the evaluation of competitors' procedures and standards, it is possible to formulate specific goals to achieve in terms of measuring service quality.

Johnston (1987) remarked on the increased need for excellent service quality within the competitive environment of the service industry. Assuming that the quality of the tangible products being offered has been maximized, service issues become important for the retention of a loyal customer base. Parasurathian, Zeithaml, and Berry (1985) pointed out that determining the quality of tangible goods is a much less formidable process than assessing quality of service, since there are many immaterial aspects that comprise either a positive or negative perception of service quality. In addition, many of these factors are subjective, varying significantly between individuals. Taken together, these elements render an objective measure of service quality difficult. Because of the subjectivity that is inherent in customers' individual perceptions of quality, Johnston (1987) concluded that although customers' perceptions of the

standards that define service quality may vary widely, firms can formulate strategies to ensure that perceptions of their service are optimized. The process of creating such strategies involves cultivating the perception of quality and concern in every aspect.

Wong, Dean, and White (1999) noted that the honing of distinctively excellent service is emerging as a strategic method for maintaining a competitive edge in today's hospitality industry. Using standard instrumentation can lead to greater practical applicability of the data gathered in future studies of hospitality industry service quality studies. The study calls into question the reliability and accuracy of the service quality scales that are often used in research, such as SERVQUAL. Through an analysis of these standard measures, the authors assert that the most important aspects of service quality within the hospitality industry are employees, tangibles (such as food quality), and reliability, with the single most important factor in shaping customers' perceptions of service quality being the establishment's employees.

Guest Satisfaction And Serving Times

An extremely important component of overall service quality within the hospitality industry is reasonable service times. This relationship is particularly significant within the context of casual dining establishments since other elements of the traditional restaurant experience are scaled down to better fit the needs of the rapidly emerging casual and fast-casual target markets.

Lee and Lambert (2001) examined the impact that various waiting times had upon customer satisfaction in a cafeteria foodservice environment. The authors sought to determine whether expected waiting times were consistent with perceived waiting times. After examining the results, it was shown that the waiting times that customers deemed as reasonable prior to dining were significantly different than the actual wait that the customers experienced. While an individual might have stated beforehand that a fifteen-minute wait would be reasonable and easy to withstand, that customer tended to characterize an actual fifteen-minute waiting period as too long.

The authors of this study concluded that on a general basis, there was an inverse relationship between what was perceived as an overlong waiting time and overarching customer satisfaction. However, because of the subjectivity in perception of passing time that the authors cited in their own review of literature, the relationship between waiting time and customer satisfaction was not always strictly based on actual waiting times. Instead, a number of additional factors seemed to tend to influence the way that customers perceived lengths of waiting time. The overall customer satisfaction was only negatively impacted when the customer perceived the waiting time to be longer than what they deemed reasonable. The complexity of the relationship between actual and perceived service time is an important one to consider in strategizing the quality of the casual dining experience.

On a more general level, Berry, Seiders, and Grewal (2002) described the phenomenon of convenience and how it functions within the service industry as a whole. Literature on this subject has paid insufficient attention to the factor of convenience within the service sector; this oversight is inexplicable as the public's expressed need for convenience continues to grow exponentially. The perception of convenience is particularly relevant in a discussion of the casual dining niche market, as the need for convenience has played a major role in the development of this category of dining establishments. In contexts where the implicit goal of the establishment is convenience, service time plays a significant role in determining customers' perceptions of overall service quality and, by extension, overall satisfaction. The authors describe waiting as largely inimical to a perception of service as being convenient. More research must be conducted before a greater understanding of the complex psychological criteria for convenient service can be fully understood. Particularly in

business environments that by their very nature promise convenience, organizations must not overlook this aspect of providing quality service.

Because of the clear connection between minimal service times and higher customer satisfaction, it is imperative casual dining establishments implement procedures that serve to diminish the waiting period experienced by guests. Ruggless (2000) discusses the ways in which restaurant management can leverage new technologies in the process of minimizing service time for customers. According to the author, proper use of technologies such as the Internet to handle inventory functions, human resources procedures, and point-of-sale transactions can all shave crucial minutes off of a dining experience. On a more general level, Chase and Hayes (1991) also confirm the efficacy of attaining efficient operations as a means of securing customer satisfaction.

Within the context of the restaurant industry, and particularly in the casual dining niche, minimal service times are crucial to increasing customer satisfaction. The restaurant sector offers so much quality in tangible offerings that quality service is the avenue establishments must take in distinguishing themselves from their competitors (Allen, 1999). This involves constant, critical reevaluation of service levels within the restaurant. There have been many surveys of a number of new Technologies that have been used with success by restaurants seeking to improve the quality of their customer service, including lobby electronic games to soften wait times, databases of customer preferences to personalize the experience, and sophisticated point-of-service systems to speed internal processes. However, the author advises that technology cannot substitute for human engagement, concern, and empathy by the staff (Bertagnoli, 1999).

Although few studies have been conducted specifically measuring service times in the casual dining context, excessive service times can have a stultifying impact upon customer perception of quality and of the dining experience as a whole. As such, restaurant management and staff must focus their efforts upon minimizing service times whenever possible.

Methodology

A two-fold study was developed to examine issues related to serving time and perceived restaurant quality. The first portion of the study examined the impact of wait times at various stages of the service process on perceived customer satisfaction. The second portion dealt with the impact of company training activity on service time efficiency. In addition, the time for table turns was measured as an indirect benefit of enhanced service time efficiency.

A convenient sample of eight restaurants operating in medium-sized metropolitan cities in southwestern part of the United States were involved with this study. Each restaurant was part of the same casual dining chain and had a weekly sales volume greater than \$40,000. The units selected had scored between 88% and 95% on previous mystery shopper reports.

In order to examine the impact of training activity on service times, the restaurants were divided into groups. Managers at four restaurants talked about service time issues to the service staff every shift during a pre-shift meeting. In addition, two of those restaurants tracked both appetizer times and entrée times on a shift by calling out the time lapsed between the orders was taken and it left kitchen. The four remaining restaurants added no additional training or discussion about service times.

An anonymous shopper program that reported the results of four shops per month for a three-month period tracked the service times of the restaurants. Data was transferred from each shopper report for the eight restaurants over the three-month

period and the information was analyzed to compare the service times of each restaurant with the company guidelines on service and table turns. Table 1 details the specific response time incidents and the corresponding company standard.

Table 1:
Response time incidents for a meal in a restaurant and corresponding company standards.

Quality Measure	Company Standard
Arrival greet: time lapsed before guest was greeted at door	15 seconds
Seating time: lapsed before guest was greeted at the table	30 seconds
Drink Service: wait time after order was take	3-4 minutes
Order time: amount of time lapsed after order was taken	12-19 minutes
Check back time: time lapsed after food was received	5 minutes
Payment time: how long guest waited for change/Credit Card Slip	3 minutes
Table turns	53 minutes
Overall quality score	
Excellent	>95
Above average	92-95
Good	90-92
Improvement needed	88-90
Poor	<88

Results

Based on reports from mystery shoppers, the quality service standards for the eight restaurants were evaluated. These results are summarized in Table 2.

Table 2:
Service standard achievement for restaurants participating in customer satisfaction study based on responses from mystery shoppers.

Service Quality Measures	Restaurants							
	Service Time Standard Met (%)							
	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8
Arrival Greet Time	100	100	100	100	66	75	83	58
Seated Greet Time	100	100	91	91	75	75	58	58
Beverage Service Time	100	100	100	100	83	83	91	83
Entrée Order Time	100	100	92	92	75	66	58	75
Check Back Time	92	100	92	92	83	83	66	58
Payment Time	100	100	92	100	75	66	50	58
	Time (minutes)							
Table Turns	44	41	48	48	51	52	53	52
	Quality Score (%)							
Overall Rating	99.8	100	97.0	96.7	90.0	86.6	91.9	89.9

Greet time

The amount of time a guest waited to be greeted by a member of the restaurant staff upon entering the building is referred to as greet time. The time standard for the arrival greet should be immediate, which is defined as less than 15 second from the time the guest walked in the front door. Three of the four restaurants that focused on service times greeted each guest at the front door within 15 seconds of the guest's

arriving at the restaurant. The four restaurants that did not focus on the service times greeted the guest with in 15 seconds only 71% of the time.

Seated greet time

Seated greet time is the length of time a guest waited to be greeted by a server after being seated for their meal. The time standard for the service greet was within 30 seconds after the guest was seated. The initial greet did not have to be done by the actual server but had to be done by a member of the service staff or a manager. The four restaurants that focused on service times greeted each guest at the table 96% of the time within 30 seconds after the guest had been seated at their table. The restaurants that were not focusing on the service times greeted the guest at the table within the standard only 68% of the time.

Beverage service time

The amount of time a guest should wait for a drink after the order was taken was 3 minutes for all drinks except frozen bar drinks that were allowed 4 minutes after the order was taken. The four restaurants that focused on service times served all beverages within the standard time set out for the service. The other restaurants served the guest within the standard only 85% of the time.

Entrée order time

The amount of time a guest should wait for their entrée after the order was taken is 12 minutes at lunch and 15 minutes at dinner. The exception to this would be when a meal involved a medium well steak the restaurant was allowed an additional two minutes and a well done steak was allowed four additional minutes for up to 19 minutes total. The two restaurant that focused on the entrée time during the service meeting before each shift and called out the entrée times before the food left the kitchen served all items within the allowed service times. The two restaurant that focused on the service times only during the service meeting before each meal served the entrée 92% within the allowed times. The four restaurant that did not focus on service times served entrees only 69% of the time within the standard.

Check back time

The service staff was trained to check back on the guest after the entrée was served to make sure the guest was satisfied with their meal. The standard allowed for this experiment was five minutes. The guest must receive a follow-up visit from the server or a member of management within five minutes of the entrée being served. The four restaurants that were focusing on service times checked back on the guest within the five- minute standard 94% of the time. At the restaurants not focusing on service times, the check back at the table was completed properly only 73% of the time.

Return of change on payment

The amount of time a guest should wait for change or the credit card voucher after presenting their form of payment is three minutes. Once a guest has finished the meal, they are usually eager to leave and every minute they wait for change seems much longer. That is why the prompt return of change to the guest is one of the most important factors in successful guest service. The four restaurants focusing on guest service times returned change to the guest within the standard 98% of the time and the four restaurants not focusing on the service times returned the change to the guest in the allotted span only 65% of the time.

Results of the table turn times

Table turn time is the length of time a guest would occupies a table at the restaurant. The company average is 53 minutes for each guest visit. This means the restaurants were able to turn each table once every 53 minutes during the day. The two restaurant that focused on at service times during the service meeting before each

shift and called out the entrée times before the food left the kitchen had a table turn time in the low 40 minute range. The two restaurants that focused on the service times only during the service meeting had an overall table turn time of 48 minutes. The four restaurants that did not focus on service times had a table turn time of greater than 50 minutes. It also must be noted that restaurant number 2, 5, and 8 are all non-smoking restaurants, and table turn in those restaurant are typically lower than a smoking restaurant by 3 to 4 minutes.

Impact on mystery shopper results

Mystery shoppers are asked to rate the restaurant on multiple items. However, service times were the most heavily weighted items when the total quality scores are calculated. The overall rating of the shoppers score are categorized in the following way:

- 95% or better was considered an excellent rating,
- 92% - 94.99% was considered an above average rating,
- 90% - 91.99 was given a good standing,
- 88.0% - 89.99% was considered a below average rating with improvements needed, and
- 87.9 or below was considered a poor rating.

The two restaurants that focused on service times during the service meeting before each shift and called out the entrée times before the food left the kitchen had a shopper rating near 100% for both restaurants. The two restaurants that focused on the service times only during the service meeting had an overall shopper rating of 97%. The other two restaurants which did not focus on service times received a shopper rating in the 90% - 92% range and were rated below 90% overall.

Recommendations

The results of this study established that for this restaurant group response times appear to impact customer satisfaction. However, the understanding and implementation of this was limited. Consequently, the management group developed a number of recommendations for consideration by management:

1. **Awareness raising:** Managers should be made aware of the impact response time has on customer attitudes and behavior. Critical incidents in the service provision should be highlighted and action taken systematically to address those areas most in need of attention.
2. **Improve data collection:** Response times should be more specifically incorporated into "mystery guest" reports.
3. **Redesign:** In some cases, the service delivery systems should be redesigned for all operations in order to reduce slow response times.
4. **Occupy time:** Attention should be given to providing distractions to customers who have to wait. Use the waiting time for selling to customers by the provision of ancillary products.
5. **Fairness:** Specific attention must be given to the style of queuing systems employed for different types of service incidents.
6. **Promise:** Promise what can be delivered, not what the customer wants to hear.
7. **Uncertainty:** Remove uncertainty by telling customers what is happening-
8. **Out of line:** Encourage customers to seek service at off-peak times.
9. **Sensitivity training:** Service employees should be sensitized to the different needs of waiting customers. *Ad hoc* observations suggest three types of customers: "watchers" enjoy the bustle and do not mind waiting too much; "neutrals" display neither enjoyment nor frustration; "impatient" hate waiting, will try queue-jumping and are likely to complain.

These recommendations have been brought to the attention of operations staff and trainers who build them into training programs. The measurement of time standards on a regular basis is an important part of meeting these recommendations. However, the wide variation in restaurant design means that it may be desirable for managers at a unit level to customize the recommendations in the context of their specific restaurant.

Conclusions

Although the theory of waiting lines and concept of blueprinting service operations has been known for a number of years, many service firms are reluctant to act without first authenticating this with its own operating focus groups or research. In designing the research an attempt was also made to demonstrate the "bottom-line impact" of response times on customers. Once satisfied, restaurant managers can implement a range of different ideas that are best suited for their particular circumstances.

This limited study gives some support to the eight propositions proposed by Czepiel, J., Solomon, M., and Surprenant, C. (1985). The study was not designed to investigate these specifically, but to provide evidence for management that action on response times was needed. A more rigorous research design is needed to confirm completely each of the propositions, although this study and the actions of many other service firms suggest that the proposed psychology of waiting lines is valid. Another small-scale research project is currently under way aimed at comparing customers' perception of waiting time with the actual time taken. Customers queuing in a restaurant will be observed and their waiting time measured. When their transaction is completed they will be asked to state how long they have waited. Waiting conditions will also be monitored to see if perceptions change under different conditions.

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