

Service Blueprint; An Effective Tool for Designing and Specifying Intangible Service Processes: An Outlook

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Abstract: Customer demand is ever changing unpredictable and also immeasurable with accuracy. It is also complex and very intricate. Marketing policies, programmes and strategies are planned, organized and executed with the main objective of customer satisfaction and service. Service refers to social efforts which include even government to fight five giant evils, e.g., want, disease, ignorance, squalor and illness in the society. In the 21st century, the business environmental conditions are likely to be more volatile. The globalization and liberalization has opened new vistas for the development of service generating organization. It should make sincere efforts to make them stronger and stronger if they have to survive and thrive. It is against this background the study follows about the service blueprinting, a useful tool for designing and specifying intangible service processes. A service blueprint is a schematic diagram that represents all the details of a service from the customer and organization's perspective. It maps out chronologically and in sequence all the various interactions and actions that occur in parallel when customer and company meet it shows all the interactions by and with the customer. A company that works toward implementing these strategies will be well on its way in delivering service quality through its people thereby diminishing Gap 2.

Key words: Service design, service blueprint, customers expectation, service provider's, intangible service, India

INTRODUCTION

Customer demand is ever changing unpredictable and also immeasurable with accuracy. It is also complex and very intricate. Under the market-oriented philosophy customer needs and desires act as the centre of the marketing universe. In fact, marketing system must respond to the customer needs and desires in all aspects. Marketing policies, programmes and strategies are planned, organized and executed with the main objective of customer satisfaction and service (Sherlekar, 2006). Service refers to social efforts which include even government to fight five giant evils, e.g., want, disease, ignorance, squalor and illness in the society. In the 21st century, the business environmental conditions are likely to be more volatile.

The globalization and liberalization has opened new vistas for the development of service generating organization. The intensity of competition is found moving upward. In the present world, it is not possible to keep ourselves isolated. Service generating organization should make sincere efforts to make them stronger and stronger if they have to survive and thrive. It is against this background the study follows about the service blueprinting a useful tool for designing and specifying intangible service processes.

REASONS FOR GROWTH IN SERVICE SECTOR

As the physiological needs of the people got fulfilled, there was a demand for more satisfaction. The changing lifestyles, changing world, changing economics, technological advances, modernization, liberalization, privatization and globalization policies, exponential growth in several economic areas, advent of Electronic Data Interchange (EDI) and computer explosion are some of the factors for stimulating the dramatic growth in services. Service industries vary greatly.

Government offer service through courts, employment services, hospitals, military service, police and fire departments, etc. Non-profit organizations offer services through museums, charities, churches, foundations and hospital.

A large number of business organization offer services like airlines, banks, insurance companies, consulting firm, medical law and practices, entertainment companies, real estate, research agencies, etc. (Varshney and Gupta, 2005). Customer focus should be managed by moments of truth.

A moments of truth refers to any episode when a customer comes into contact with any aspect of the business and on the basis of that contact forms, an opinion about the quality of service and the quality of the

product (Phelps, 2003). They do not restrict their views to the narrow confines of product availability or to just those members of the sales forces who supposed to be the ambassadors of the company (Czinkota and Kotabe, 2002).

A good customer focused organization will try and create more moments of truth not less. They will try and increase the number of contracts and the frequency of contacts that a customer has with an organization whether it is looking at a brochure speaking on the phone reading an e-mail or clicking on a web site, etc. These moments of truth need to be encouraged and maximized. So, every customer contact is a moment of truth an opportunity to delight or disappoint.

THE CUSTOMER GAP

No service will ever stay the same. Whether deliberate or unplanned, changes will always occur. Therefore, formalizing the review process to make those changes that enhance service quality from the customer's point of view is critical.

The customer gap is the difference between customer expectations and perceptions. Customer expectations are standards or reference points that customer bring into the service experience whereas customer perceptions are subjective assessments of actual service experiences. So, closing the gap between what customers expect and what they perceive is critical in delivering quality service the basis for the gaps shown in the model (Lovelock *et al.*, 2005) (Fig. 1). Meeting customer expectations of service requires not only understanding what the expectations are

but also taking action on that knowledge. Action takes several forms: designing services based on customer requirements setting service standards to ensure that employees perform as customers expect and providing physical evidence that creates the appropriate cues and ambience for service. When action does not take place there is a gap-service design and standards gap as shown in the accompanying (Fig.1, Gap 2).

CHALLENGES OF SERVICE DESIGN

Just like manufacturing business good service firms use marketing to position themselves strongly in chosen target markets. Southwest Airlines position itself as a no-frills short-haul air-line charging very low fares. WallMart promises always charging very low prices always. These and other service firms establish their positions through traditional marketing mix activities. As well many successful service companies focus their attention on both their customers and employees. They understand the service-profit chain which links service firm profits with employee and customer satisfaction.

The tremendous growth and economic contribution of the service sector have drawn increasing attention to the issues and challenges of service sector industries worldwide. A company must consider special services characteristics while designing marketing programs since they are intangibility, inseparability, variability and perishability (Kotler and Armstrong, 2004):

- Intangible; they cannot be seen, tasted, felt, heard or smelled before they are bought
- Service inseparability; they are produced and consumed at the same time and cannot be separated from their providers whether the providers are people or machine
- Service variability; their quality may vary greatly depending on who provides them and when, where and how
- Service perish ability; they cannot be stored for late sale or use

Because services are largely intangible and process oriented they are difficult to describe and communicate. When services are delivered over a long period like 1 week's resort vacation a 6 months consulting engagement, etc., their complexity increases and they become even more difficult to define and describe because services are delivered by employees to customers they are variable. These characteristics of services which are the heart of the challenge involved in designing services.

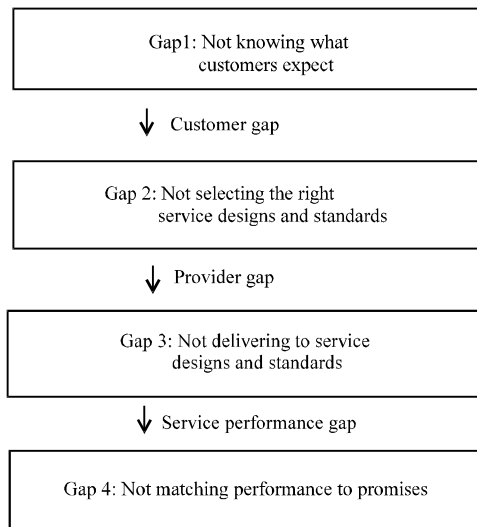


Fig. 1: Gap between customer expectations and service providers

SERVICE STINKS

Despite the importance of service and the bottom line profit potential for service, consumers perceive that over all the quality of service is declining. Because services cannot be touched, examined or tried out people frequently resort to words in their efforts to describe them. Lynn Shostack, a pioneer in developing design concepts for services has pointed out four risks of attempting to describe services in words alone. The first risk is over simplification; secondly, in-completeness; third, subjectivity and biased interpretation is a final risk. All these risks become very apparent in the new service development process when organization may be attempting to design services never before experienced by customers.

It is critical that all involved (managers front-line employees and behind the scenes support staff) be working with the same concepts of the new services based on customer needs and expectation. For a service that already exists, any attempt to improve it will also suffer unless everyone has a shared vision of the service and associated issues.

SERVICE BLUEPRINTING

A stumbling block in developing new services (and in improving existing services) is the difficulty of describing and depicting the service at the concept development service development and market test stages. One of the keys to matching service specifications to customer expectations is the ability to describe critical service process characteristics objectively and to depict them so that employees, customers and managers alike know what the service is can see their role in its delivery and understand all the steps and flows involved in the service process (Zeithaml *et al.*, 2008). A service blueprint is a picture or map that accurately portrays the service system so that the different people involved in providing it can understand and deal with is objectively regardless of their roles or their individual points of view. Blue prints are particularly useful at the design stage of service development.

A service blueprint visually displays the service by simultaneously depicting the process of service delivery, the points of customer contact, the roles of customers and employees and the visible elements of the service. It provides a way to break a service down into its logical components and to depict the steps or tasks in the process the means by which the tasks are executed and the evidence of service as the customer experiences it. The benefits involved in service blueprint are:

- To provide a clear and objective understanding of the service process to all the people involved in providing the service
- It is also a useful tool for examining the effectiveness of existing service processes and designing new or improved service processes
- It displays various aspects of service such as sequence of operations performed by different service providers, the points of customer contacts, the roles of customers and employees and the visual elements of service
- Service blueprinting gives service providers a visual way to express their intentions and goals while linking them to customer's perceptions and needs as the service activity progresses
- Just as architects use blueprints to communicate their designs to engineers, building occupants and owners service blueprinting can be used as a communicative tool between those who consume services and those who design, enable, track and deliver services
- Finally, blueprint presents a collaborative visualization that all stakeholders, including the customer can recognize discuss and debate

BUILDING A BLUEPRINT

Many of the benefits and purposes of building a blueprint evolve from the process of doing it. The final product is not necessarily the only goal. Through the process of developing the blueprint many intermediate goals can be achieved: clarification of the concept, development of a shared service vision, recognition of complexities and intricacies of the service that are not initially apparent and delineation of roles and responsibilities to name a few. The development of the blueprint needs to involve a variety of functional representatives as well as information from customers (Fig. 2)

Step 1; identify the service process to be blueprinted:

This is basic service concept level. Little detail is shown and variations based on market segment or specific services are not shown. Specific blue prints could be developed for 2 days express mail, large account, internet-facilitated services or storefront drop-off centers.

Each of these blueprints would share some features with the concept of the service. A firm can identify the process to be mapped one it has determined the underlying purpose for building the blueprint.

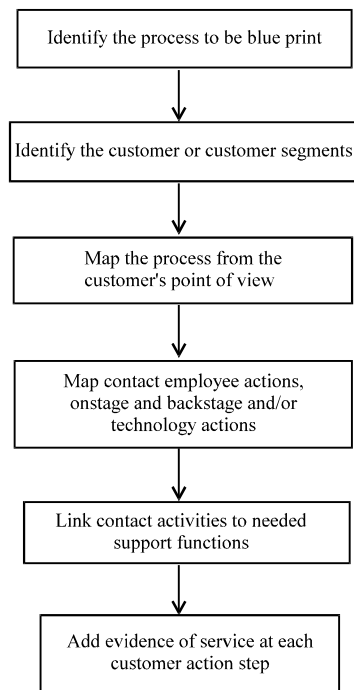


Fig. 2: Identifies the basic steps in building a blueprint

Step 2; identify the customer or customer segment experiencing the service: Blueprints are most useful when developed for a particular customer or customer segment assuming that the service process varies across segments. At a very abstract or conceptual level, it may be possible to combine customer segments on the blueprint. Once detail is reached at any level separate blueprints should be developed to avoid confusion and maximize their usefulness.

Step 3; mapping the service process from the customer's point of view: Often managers and others who are not on the front lines do not actually know what the customers are experiencing. This step involves charting the choices and actions that the customer performs or experiences in purchasing, consuming and evaluating the service. Identifying the service from the customer's point of view first will help avoid focusing on processes and steps that have no customer impact. It forces agreement on who the customer is and may involve considerable research to determine exactly how the customer experiences the service.

Step 4; map contact employee actions, both onstage and backstage and technology actions: First the lines of interaction and visibility are drawn and then the process from the customer contact person's point of view is

mapped distinguishing visible or onstage activities from invisible backstage activities. For existing services, this step involves questioning front-line operations employees to learn what they do and which activities are performed in full view of the customer versus which activities are carried out behind the scenes. For technology-delivered services or those that combine technology and human delivery the required actions of the technology interface will be mapped above the line of visibility as well, i.e., an additional horizontal line can separate onstage contact employee actions from onstage technology actions. Using the additional line will facilitate reading and interpretation of the service blueprint.

Step 5; link contact activities to needed support functions: The line of internal interaction can then be drawn and linkages from contact activities to internal support functions can be identified. In this process, the direct and indirect impact of internal actions on customers becomes apparent. Internal service processes take on added importance when viewed in connection with their link to the customer. Alternatively certain steps in the process may be viewed as unnecessary if there is no clear link to the customer's experience or to an essential internal support service.

Step 6; add evidence of service at each customer action step: Finally, the evidence of service can be added to the blueprint to illustrate what the customer sees and receives as tangible evidence of the service at each step in the customer experience. A photographic blueprint including photos, slides or video of the process can be very useful at this stage to aid in analyzing the impact of tangible evidence and its consistency with the overall strategy and service positioning.

Decisions about marketing services are related to the structure of the services itself. A firm has to decide which service to sell or offer and how the service should be designed. Again the issue of standardization needs to be addressed although there are fewer opportunities for economics of scale by standardizing services worldwide. A company needs to decide on the content of the service it wants to offer and the manner in which the service is to be performed or consumed (Jeannet and Hennessey, 2001). Thus, blueprints are flexible and powerful in that they depict a service at multiple levels of analysis they can facilitate the refinement of a single step as well as the creation of an entire service process. It is a way of seeing the service from the customer focus the key part of the compliance outcome. In creating the current and future state blueprints, it allows the team to articulate and act upon customer insights and focus on what's working, what's not working and what needs to be changed.

CONCLUSION

Service blueprinting is a particularly effective tool in the new service development process. Service providers must effectively match customer expectations to new service innovations and actual service process designs. However because of the very nature of services their intangibility and variability specifically the design and development of service offerings are complex and challenging. Thus, blueprint can make a complex and intangible service concrete through its visual depiction of all the steps, actors, processes and physical evidence of the service. A company that works toward implementing these strategies will be well on its way in delivering service quality through its people thereby diminishing Gap 2.

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