

## Gap model of service quality

The Gap model of service quality was developed by Parasuraman, Berry and Zeithaml (1985), and more recently described in Zeithaml and Bitner (2003). It has served as a framework for research in services marketing, including hospitality marketing, for over two decades. The model identifies four specific gaps leading to a fifth overall gap between customers' expectations and perceived service.

### The five gaps

- Customers have expectations for service experiences and they use them to measure against the perceived service performance in their judgment of service quality. It is essential, then, that managers determine what those expectations are when designing the service. The first gap in service quality occurs when management fails to accurately identify customer expectations. It is referred to as the **knowledge gap**. Specifically, it is the difference in customer expectations and management's perception of customer expectations. Hotel managers, for instance, must know and understand what their guests expect from their stay, including all tangibles (the room, amenities, lobby features) and intangible components (availability of additional services, ease of check-in and check-out procedures). The **size of the gap** is dependent on:
  - the extent of upward communication (from customers to top management),
  - the number of layers of management,
  - the size of the organization,
  - and most importantly, the extent of marketing research to identify customer expectations.
- The second gap is referred to as the **design gap**. It is measured by how well the service design specifications match up to management's perception of customer expectations. The extent of this gap is dependent on management's belief that service quality is important and that it is possible, as well as the resources that are available for the provision of the service. A restaurant manager may understand customer expectations for being served within 20 minutes of ordering, but may not have the resources or the appropriate number of staff to insure that speed of service.

- Gap 3 represents the variation in service design and service delivery. Known as the *performance gap*, its extent is a function of many variables involved in the provision of service. Since individuals perform the service, the quality may be affected by such factors as **skill level**, type of **training received**, **degree of role congruity (agreeability) or conflict**, and **job fit**. Some **service providers** (i.e. waiters, front-desk staff) do not have a **high service inclination**, despite training. Service recovery efforts along with extent of **responsibility** and **empowerment** also **affect the size of this gap**.
  - The process is further complicated by the customer's **participation** in the service encounter. A customer may make a special request for a room type different from the one originally reserved, or request a menu item after the initial order has been completed, making it more difficult to perform the service as intended.
- The fourth gap is called the *communications gap*. It is the difference between what is promised to customers, either explicitly or implicitly, and what is being delivered. Hospitality companies use advertising, personal selling, and sales promotion to inform, persuade, and remind guests about its products and services. Showing beautifully appointed hotel rooms, refreshing swimming pools, and luxurious lobby areas in an advertisement communicates to the target customers. The extent of communications between the company and the advertising agencies **will affect the size of the gap**. Over-promising is commonly responsible for the communication gap. Each gap has a **cumulative effect** from the preceding gaps.
- **Gap 5** is the total accumulation of variation in **Gaps 1 through 4 and represents the difference between expectations and perceived service**. Furthermore, consumers evaluate perceived service along five quality dimensions.

## Dimensions of service quality

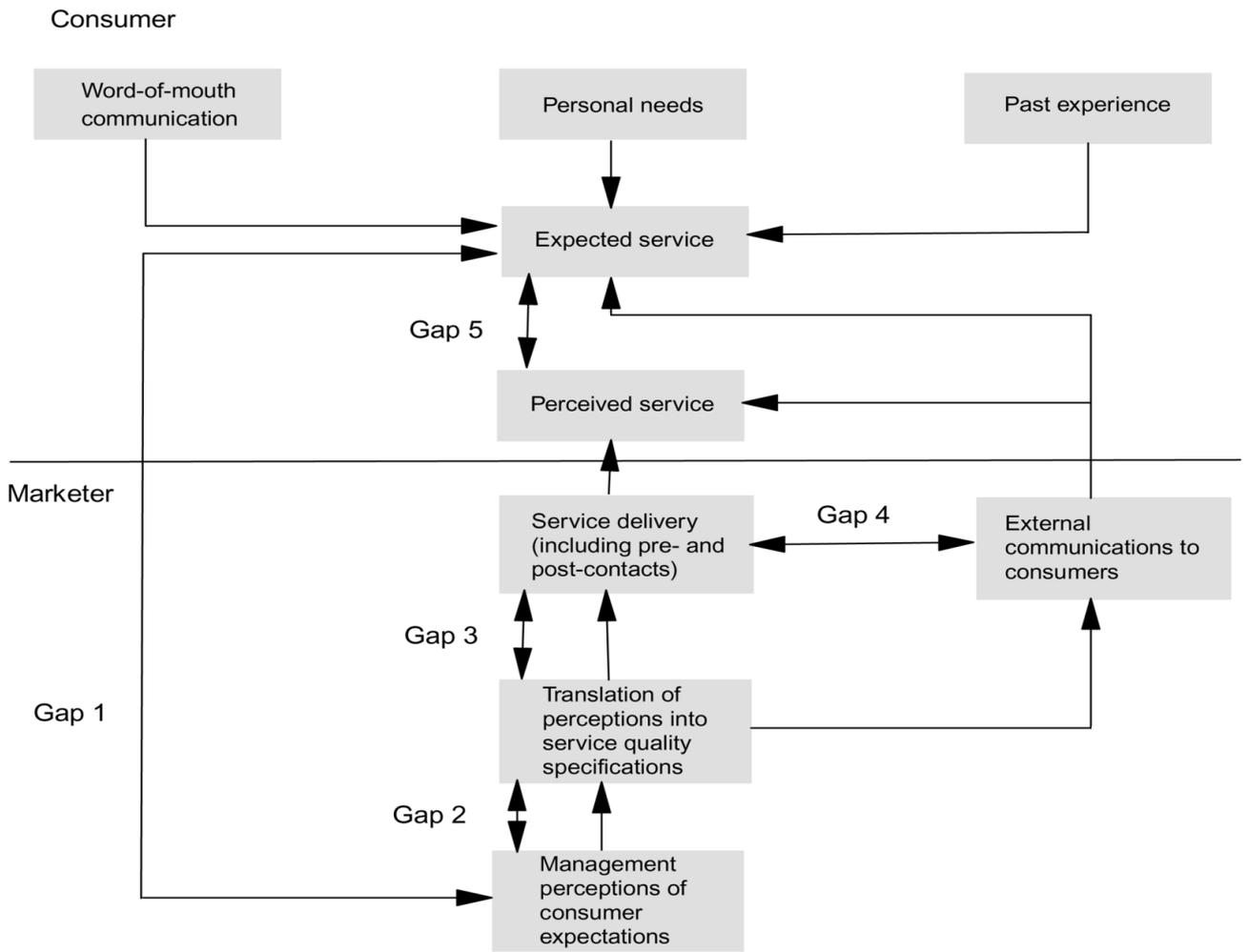
Service quality dimensions refer to the psychological dimensions that form the basis of a customer's perceived quality of a service. While numerous marketing researchers have attempted to define the specific dimensions of service quality, Parasuraman, Berry, and Zeithaml (1985) introduced the definition in their presentation of the Gap Model of Service Quality. They proposed that five specific dimensions of service quality exist and apply regardless of the service industry: **reliability, responsiveness, assurance, empathy, and tangibles**.

The most important service quality dimension to customers is *reliability*.

- **Reliability** is defined as the ability to perform the promised service dependably and accurately. In other words, it means **doing what you say you will do**. Customers have consistently stated that a company's ability to deliver promises is the most vital factor to providing service quality. Having a room ready upon check-in is an example of the reliability dimension.
  
- **Responsiveness** is the willingness to help customers and to provide prompt service. Customers judge a company's responsiveness by assessing the amount of time it takes and the attentiveness that is offered in response to their requests, questions, complaints, and problems. Companies that use automated phone systems, regularly put customers on hold, or consistently have long wait times or long lines tend to be rated low on the responsiveness dimension. Responding quickly to requests or complaints leads to a higher rating on this dimension.
  
- The third dimension of service quality is **assurance**. Assurance is defined as employees' knowledge and courtesy and the ability of the firm and its **employees to inspire trust and confidence**. The assurance dimension is particularly important in service industries offering high levels of credence qualities, such as auto repair and medical services. The importance of the assurance dimension increases in proportion to the risk, and the greater the inability for a customer to evaluate the service. The expertise of an endorser or a particular service provider for a cruise vacation may affect the level of confidence and trust a customer has toward that service.

- **Empathy** is defined as the caring, individualized attention the firm provides its customers. Customers perceive the level of a company's empathy by the degree of personalized service offered. Customers want to be known on an individual basis and feel that the company understands and addresses their individual needs. When competing with companies that enjoy economies of scale, small companies can earn greater market shares by focusing on empathy. Showing concern for a guest whose luggage is lost is a way to improve the overall perceived service quality.
- The final dimension of service quality is **tangibles**. Tangibles are defined as the appearance of physical facilities, equipment, personnel and communication materials. Service industries such as hotels and restaurants rely heavily on tangibles. Guests often judge the quality of a hotel experience on the quality of the physical environment and tangible amenities.

Each time they experience a service, guests are evaluating the hospitality organization. These customers judge the overall service quality by looking at its five dimensions during all interactions with service providers. Companies need to perform well on all dimensions of service quality to insure a positive overall evaluation.



**Source:** Parasuraman, Zeithaml and Berry, 1985.