SERVICE QUALITY IN ADMINISTRATIVE DEPARTMENTS OF PRIVATE UNIVERSITIES IN THAILAND: STRATEGIES AND RECOMMENDATIONS

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ABSTRACT

To be a service leader in the educational field, it is necessary for private universities to offer quality services to students. As a continuation of the previous paper (Kitcharoen, 2004) on the service quality of administrative departments in Thai private universities, this research was aimed at exploring university senior administrators’ opinions about service quality. Six private universities were randomly chosen from the population of 26 private universities in Thailand. The presidents and vice presidents of these universities were interviewed. The research findings show that according to the university senior administrators, the most important service attribute is “Empathy”, while the best performed service attribute is “Tangible”. Although most administrators believed the students are satisfied with the service quality, all of them acknowledged the necessity for further improvement.

INTRODUCTION

To be a service leader in the educational field, it is necessary for private universities to offer quality services to students. Service leaders view excellent service as the driving force of the business. Excellent service separates them from their competitors. Therefore, improving the service quality in private universities is one of the strategies to enhance their sustainable competitive advantage.

This research is a continuation of the two previous papers (Kitcharoen, 2004). The first paper reviews the literature related to the service quality in the education industry, in particular the application of the SERVQUAL model and the IPA techniques. The second paper reports the results of a questionnaire survey of students and the university staff members on the service quality of the administrative departments of Thai private universities. This research paper, on the other hand, focused on the qualitative data gathered from face to face interviews with the top administrators of six private universities in Thailand.

LITERATURE REVIEW

This section of the paper summarizes the relevant literature reviewed on the SERVQUAL model and the IPA techniques which also constitute the theoretical framework of this research paper.

Service Quality & Customer Expectation
Parasuraman, Zeithaml, & Berry, (1985) described service quality as the ability of the organization to meet or exceed customer expectations. The definition of service quality, therefore, is focused on meeting the customers’ needs and requirements, and how well the service delivered matches the customers’ expectations of it.

Dimensions of Service Quality
Parasuraman, Zeithaml, and Berry (1985), put forward a list of ten determinants of service quality that can be generalized to any type of service. These ten dimensions were regrouped in the well known five dimensions in the SERVQUAL model (Parasuraman, Zeithaml, and Berry 1990) which include “tangible”, “reliability”, “responsiveness”, “assurance”, and “empathy”:

- **Tangible** - appearance of physical facilities, equipment, personnel, and communication materials.
- **Reliability** - ability to perform the promised service dependable and accurately.
- **Responsiveness** - willingness to help customers and provide prompt service.
• Assurance - knowledge and courtesy of staff and their ability to convey trust and confidence.
• Empathy – caring and individualized attention

The Importance-Performance Analysis (IPA) technique

The Importance-Performance Analysis conceptually rests on multi-attribute models. This technique identifies strengths and weaknesses of a market offering in terms of two criteria that consumers use in making a choice. One criterion is the relative importance of attributes. The other is consumers’ evaluation of the offering in terms of those attributes. After determining those attributes that are worthy of subsequent examination, consumers are asked two questions. One relates to the salience of the attributes and the other to the company’s own performance in terms of delivery of these attributes.

Service Quality in Universities

Earlier studies on service quality in higher education placed higher emphasis on the academic areas instead of the administrative areas, concentrating on effective course delivery mechanisms, and the quality of courses and teaching (Athiyaman, 1997; Bourner, 1998; Cheng and Tam, 1997; McElwee and Redman, 1993; Palihawadana, 1996; Soutar and McNeil, 1996; Varey, 1993; Yorke, 1992). Abouchedid and Nasser (2002), however, attempted to measure student perception of registration and academic advising across different faculties and other administrative services to assure positive quality service complementing that of the academic.

There are many reasons for focusing the service quality in a university on the administrative units (Anderson 1995): The first exposure of the student to the university is through the admission and registrar’s services. Providing high quality service to students contributes to the positive assessment of the university. As compared with the academic units, the administrative departments of the university, such as the registration office, financial office, or library, are more likely to be a replication of the bureaucratic units of governmental or public institutions (Salem, 1969). While registration in the Western universities has rapidly adopted the banking touch-tone telephone systems, universities in developing countries attempt to struggle with bureaucracies and inefficient infrastructure; hence registration remains a traditional and manual process (Spencer, 1991).

Research Objectives

The aim of this research was to explore the university senior administrators’ opinions about service quality of private universities in Thailand. This involved investigating the perceived importance and perceived performance of services quality of administrative departments of private universities in Thailand, from the perspectives of the university senior administrators.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

To investigate the relationship between the importance aspect and performance aspect, face to face interviews were used to collect the qualitative data from the university administrators. A sample of university administrators (i.e., presidents and vice-presidents) comprised of twelve interviewees. These interviewees were selected from Assumption University, Bangkok University, Kasem Bundit University, Siam University, Sripatum University, and St. John’s University. The selected interviewees were interviewed on a voluntary basis. This criterion was employed to assure basic examining of top management people of the universities. Qualitative and quantitative approaches (e.g., paraphrasing, debriefing, descriptive statistics) were applied for describing research results.

FINDINGS

This section is divided into two parts including 1.) Characteristics of Interviewees, and 2.) The Interview Results.

1) Characteristics of Interviewees

Table 1 shows the characteristics of interviewees in terms of their status (president or vice president) and gender. Half of the twelve interviewees were presidents of the private universities in Thailand, and the other half of the twelve interviewees were vice presidents of the private universities in Thailand. Two thirds of them were male and one third of them were female.
Table 1: Characteristics of Interviewees

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Gender</th>
<th>President</th>
<th>Vice President</th>
<th>Percentage</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Male</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>67%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Female</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>33%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Percentage</td>
<td>50%</td>
<td>50%</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

2) Interview Results

The interview results are presented in the following 4 parts: 1) The perception of university administrators on service quality; 2) The student perceptions on service quality as understood by the university administrators; 3) The plans and mechanisms to improve service quality and 4) The university administrator’s comments on the student and staff survey.

2.1) Perception of the University Administrators on Service Quality

The interviewees who were university administrators were asked to choose the most important attributes among the five service attributes of the SERVQUAL model according to their understanding.

Table 2: Rank of the Importance of Service Attributes perceived by the University Administrators

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Service Attribute</th>
<th>Number of Interviewees</th>
<th>Percentage of Interviewees</th>
<th>Rank based on frequency</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Tangible</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>25 %</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Reliability</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>16.67 %</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Responsiveness</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>8.33 %</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Assurance</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0 %</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Empathy</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>50 %</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>100 %</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The University Administrators’ Perception on the Actual Performance of Service Attributes

The interviewees who were university administrators were then asked to choose the best performed attributes among the five service attributes of the SERVQUAL model according to their understanding.

Half of the interviewees chose “Empathy” as the most important service attribute. They suggested that service providers need to serve students with service minds. Service providers must offer services with sincerity, approachability, friendliness, and understanding of the needs of students. A quarter of the interviewees chose “Tangible” as the most important service attribute. They suggested that the tangible dimensions such as building, offices, appearance of service providers will leave the first impression that students would have when they come to the university. The other service attributes chosen included “Reliability”, and “Responsiveness”. “Assurance” was not chosen as the most important attribute (See Table 2).

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The University Administrators’ Perception on the Actual Performance of Service Attributes

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Half of the interviewees chose “Tangible” as the best performed attributes in the service provided by the administrative departments of their universities. Most of them claimed that their universities have beautiful buildings, modern offices, and advanced technology. They were ready to invest more in this dimension and it is easy to improve on the quality of these tangible aspects.

A quarter of the interviewees chose “Assurance” as the best performed attributes. The other service attributes chosen include “Responsiveness” and “Empathy”. “Reliability” was not been chosen as the most important attribute (See Table 3)
Table 3: Rank of the Actual Performance of Service Attributes perceived by the University Administrators

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Service Attribute</th>
<th>Number of Interviewees</th>
<th>Percentage of Interviewees</th>
<th>Rank based on frequency</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Tangible</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>50 %</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Reliability</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0 %</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Responsiveness</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>16.67 %</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Assurance</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>25 %</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Empathy</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>8.33 %</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>100 %</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Mismatch between the Most Important & the Best Performed Attributes

A mismatch of the rank orders of most important and best performed attributes are observed (see table 4). For example, the attribute of "empathy" was perceived by the university administrators as the most important attribute. However, the best performed attributes were physical facilities, appearance of office and personnel (tangible), and competence and credibility (assurance) of the administrative departments.

Table 4: Mismatch between the Most Important & the Best Performed Attributes

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>No.</th>
<th>Rank of Importance</th>
<th>No.</th>
<th>Rank of Performance</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1.</td>
<td>Empathy</td>
<td>1.</td>
<td>Tangible</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2.</td>
<td>Tangible</td>
<td>2.</td>
<td>Assurance</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3.</td>
<td>Reliability</td>
<td>3.</td>
<td>Responsiveness</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4.</td>
<td>Responsiveness</td>
<td>4.</td>
<td>Empathy</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5.</td>
<td>Assurance</td>
<td>5.</td>
<td>Reliability</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Perceived Importance

All interviewees who were university administrators agree that service quality is very important for private universities in Thailand, while nearly half of the respondents believe it is the most important factor for private universities. All interviewees also agree that service quality of the administrative departments is very important for private universities in Thailand. These departments include registration office, office of financial management, library, computing center, etc.

A few interviewees even believe the service quality of the administrative department is just as important as that of the academic units. These departments would normally give students the first impression of a university. Their service quality is more tangible as compared with the academic service and it is easier to compare the administrative service between different universities. Students also have more confidence in their judgment of the service quality of administrative departments and sometimes have a high expectation.

Perceived Service Quality

Half of the interviewees were satisfied with service quality provided by administrative departments in their university. However, they said that services provided by these departments were still not perfect. A quarter of the interviewees mentioned that the degree of their satisfaction with service quality of these administrative departments is increasing but they still would like to improve the quality of services. Another quarter of twelve interviewees were completely satisfied with service quality provided by administrative departments in their universities. They mentioned that the service quality provided by these departments met the service standard of their universities.
2.2) Students' Perception on Service Quality as Understood by the University Senior Administrators

Perceived Student Satisfaction
Most of the interviewees who were university administrators believed that most students were satisfied with service quality provided by the administrative departments in their universities. However, two out of twelve respondents disagreed. They mentioned that most students were not satisfied with the service quality of administrative departments in their universities. The reasons given for dissatisfaction include: 1) service providers cannot adjust themselves to the new situations; 2) service providers do not have sufficient skills to serve student requests; and 3) students have high expectations in terms of the services provided.

However, all interviewees who were top management people believed that the overall service quality in administrative departments of private universities is better than the overall service quality in administrative departments of public (state) universities in Thailand. Most interviewees said that private universities are more flexible than public universities, although private universities do not receive full subsidiaries or supports like public universities in areas such as, investment, campus construction and research funds.

Complaints of the Students
Most interviewees received complaints about service quality in administrative departments in their universities from students. Only one interviewee reported that he did not receive any complaint about the administrative departments. One third of the interviewees received complaints two to three times a semester, while one interviewee received complaints two to three times a month. A quarter of the interviewees claimed they would solve the problems immediately after they received the complaints.

In terms of areas of complaints, half of the interviewees pointed to the registration office as the place which receives the most complaints. It was suggested that the high frequency of complaints addressed to the registration office is due to the fact that it is the office which deals with every student, with services such as registration, announcement of grade and assessment, issuance of ID cards, certificates, transcripts and other necessary documents.

Plans and Mechanism to Improve Service Quality

Current Situation
Most interviewees reported mechanisms to monitor and improve service quality in their universities. Half of the interviewees said they used the ISO system, with ISO 9000, ISO 9001 or ISO 9002. The interviewees who do not use the ISO system pointed out that the ISO system is not suitable for educational institutions. One third of interviewees reported the use of an internal “Quality Assurance” system in their universities. They saw the benefit of the QA system as providing automatic feedback of the service processes of each administrative department. The university administrators can use the information to solve the service problems immediately.

Other channels of student feed back on service quality were suggested as follows:
- Suggestion boxes
- Internet
- Research conducted by research centers with questionnaires survey
- Personal contact

Some administrators set up a committee to supervise the administrative departments while other administrators supervised the job themselves.

Strategic Directions
Half of the interviewees who were university administrators believed that the universities need to improve service quality on a continuing basis. The service quality provided by these departments need to be adjusted all the time with the changes in technology and changes in students' preferences. The proposed strategies to improve the service quality in the administrative departments include the following:

1. Selecting the right person: Human resources department should adjust the recruitment process and the director should test and interview the applicants concerning their qualifications, competence, skill, service attitude, etc., before selecting service providers. Selecting the right person can help the university to offer the service quality to students.

2. Providing better training: Training programs conducted by specialists, seminars in relevant topics may be offered for administrative staff to learn about values, mission, objectives, strategies, services, and
practices of the organization. Some administrators also emphasized the importance of the moral and ethic standards as well as the service mind set of the administrative staff.

3. Establishing incentives: An incentive system should be applied for administrative staff in administrative departments. The university should measure the performance of administrative staff and reward them if they provided quality service to students. Rewards may be in the form of high salary, better welfare or promotion.

4. Building up the organizational structure: A service assessment committee in the university was proposed. The committee will assess the quality of service provided by administrative departments and report to the university administrators for solving any service problems immediately.

5. Enhancing the communication channel: Questionnaires surveys with students for measuring service quality in administrative departments of their universities should be conducted periodically. The data collected should be analyzed and the findings can be used as a guideline to improve service quality.

Implementation Plan

Nearly all university administrators admitted the lack of implementation plans which are in line with the strategic direction outlined above. In terms of priority, more than half of the interviewees would like to solve the service problems and improve the service quality in the registration office before other administrative departments.

Student Satisfaction

The interviewees who were university senior administrators were asked to comment on the results of the survey in terms of degree of student satisfaction. The survey results showed that the students were “still not satisfied” with overall service quality provided by administrative departments of private universities while the administrative staff were “satisfied” with their services provided.

Two out of twelve interviewees admitted that the opinions of the staff might be biased. Staff members may think that they have good service performances while students do not think so. One interviewee suggested that students are not satisfied with service quality because they have high expectations on services provided.

CONCLUSION

In this study, in-depth, open-ended, face-to-face interviews were conducted in order to gather the opinions from the top management in private universities in Thailand.

While most of the interviewees agreed with the findings which showed that “Assurance” dimension is the most important factors, some interviewees still felt that the “Empathy” dimension should be the most important. In terms of the actual performance of service dimensions, most university administrators were in accord with students. Students believed that the “Empathy” dimension should be improved urgently. Most university administrators disagreed with staff members in that the “Reliability” dimension should be improved immediately. Finally, most university administrators agreed with the findings which indicated that students are not satisfied with the service quality provided by administrative departments and they were in agreement that these departments in private universities should be improved as soon as possible.
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