

Relationships of Service Quality Perceptions To Public School Volunteerism Among Non-Parents

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Abstract

United States public education systems seek community volunteers. This paper takes a marketing perspective of volunteerism and reports on 124 non-parents who responded to a mail survey. Results indicate that certain SERVQUAL/SERVPERF type items are related to willingness to volunteer for public schooling support activities.

Introduction

Public education is under scrutiny in the United States. Among the challenges is the need to improve perceptions of the quality of school services among non-parents. Non-parents are an important marketing input public that is asked to provide financial and social support, including volunteering for community involvement activities. However, non-parents are not direct recipients of public school services and have little contact with schools. This study reports on 124 registered voter, homeowners without school age children, who responded to a mail survey on school services in a urban school district. This paper applies the SERVQUAL/SERVPERF conceptual frameworks (Parasuraman, Zeithaml and Berry 1985, 1994; Parasuraman, Berry and Zeithaml 1991; Cronin and Taylor 1992, 1994) to social marketing by considering whether SERVQUAL/SERVPERF type items can predict non-parents' willingness to volunteer for public school support activities.

Service Quality and Volunteerism

Not-for-profit organizations often depend on volunteers as a key resource. Moreover, volunteers may be a source of special expertise required by the organization such as when a school system seeks outside speakers who can inform students about career opportunities. Volunteers also may be an important vehicle for linking to the community. While SERVQUAL and SERVPERF items have been shown to produce reliable and valid scales for dimensions of service quality based on customers' direct experiences in for-profit retail settings, the use of such items may be problematic for assessing non-parents' perceptions of public school services since non-parents might have little direct contact with school systems. However, non-parents may have perceptions of the performance of the school system that influence willingness to volunteer for support activities. Such perceptions may be gained from mass media reports, as well as contact with other members of the community who have had contact with the schools. While such reported perceptions would not be an accurate gauge of actual school system performance, this "input" public's (Kotler and Andreasen, 1991) perceptions may have consequences for the willingness to volunteer.

The work of Parasuraman, Zeithaml and Berry (1985; Zeithaml, Parasuraman and Berry 1990, 1994) and the work of Cronin and Taylor (1992, 1994) have produced conceptual models for studying service quality in for-profit settings. The SERVQUAL model, drawn from focus group interviews in a variety of service businesses, focuses on five components of service quality: tangibility, reliability, responsiveness, assurance, empathy. Zeithaml, Parasuraman and Berry (1990) proposed an analysis which involved obtaining respondent ratings for 22 items with

regard to the importance of specific issues in a given service delivery situation and 22 corresponding quality rating items for a specific organization. Overall quality could then be assessed as a function of the item-based quality ratings weighted by the importance ratings. These 22 importance and 22 quality items are referred to as the SERVQUAL items.

The cumbersome nature of the method, and earlier research in customer expectations and satisfaction (Teas 1994; Bolton and Drew 1990; Oliver 1980), led to the search for more efficient methods. Cronin and Taylor (1992, 1994) identified and tested four approaches combining quality, importance, expectations and performance ratings for the 22 SERVQUAL items in four retail business areas. They concluded that an explicit performance evaluation based approach (SERVPERF). Moreover, the Cronin and Taylor (1994) research using confirmatory factor analysis indicated that the SERVQUAL/SERVPERF items were not statistically independent. The present study draws on this background by using SERVQUAL/SERVPERF type items to operationalize perceptions of service quality.

Methodology

The data used for this study were developed from a mailed questionnaire survey sent to 1,991 randomly selected registered voters in a single urban school district which had been engaged in public controversy regarding educational quality, leadership, budgets and school safety for several years. Questionnaires were returned by 298 respondents, providing a response rate of 15.0%. Of these, 124 were homeowners without school age children and provided responses to all service quality and volunteerism items used in this report. Of these, 51.6% identified themselves as men and 48.4% as women. The respondents tended to be older (to be expected since many had grown children); only 18.6% were age 50 or below, 20.3% were age 51 to 60, 35.6% were age 61 to 70, and 25.4% were over 70 years of age. Regarding education, only 4.9% did not have a high school degree, 19.5% had a high school degree only, 42.3% had only a college degree, and 33.3% had pursued graduate studies.

Although the available space allowed only sixteen items that could address the SERVQUAL dimensions, the included items addressed each of the five SERVQUAL dimensions. While items had to be adapted to the public school context, following the SERVPERF recommendation of Cronin and Taylor (1994) performance based wording was used and SERVPERF wording was maintained wherever possible. The items used in this study were scored on a 1 to 5 scale with "1" indicating "Strongly Disagree", "3" indicating "Don't Know" and "5" indicating "Strongly Agree." Scales were developed by classifying the items according to their original SERVQUAL dimensions and then summing the item scores. Cronbach's Alpha tests (Nunnally 1978; Peterson 1994) were used to verify that all items contributed to increased statistical reliability. These tests led to combining the Reliability and Assurance scales as it was found that a higher Alpha was produced with the two sets of items combined than for either scale separately. The Tangibility scale produced an Alpha of .69; reliability .90, Responsiveness-Assurance .90; and Empathy .78. Respondents' overall assessments of the quality (Overall Quality) of the school system were addressed by a statement similar to that used by Parasuraman, Berry and Zeithaml (1991): "I rate the quality of ___ services as ..." (a blank is used here in place of the name of the school system). A seven-point scale was provided: 1 indicating "very poor," 4 indicating "uncertain," and 7 indicating "excellent." Willingness to volunteer (Volunteer) was assessed by five items. These inquired as to whether respondents would be willing to serve as a tutor at study sessions, serve on a planning committee, give time to support extracurricular activities, serve as a life skills mentor for an individual student, and visit classes to read to students. Each item had a five point scale

with 1 indicating "would not do this," 2 indicating "might do this," and 5 indicating "definitely would do this." Volunteer was created by summing these items. This scale produced an Alpha of .91.

Analysis and Findings

In order to assess the degree to which the SERVQUAL/SERVPERF type scales used here may be related to willingness to volunteer, a backward stepwise multiple regression approach was used. This approach allowed some degree of consideration of multicollinearity which prior research and inspection of zero-order correlations indicated may be present among the independent variables. The results of these analyses are presented in Table 1. In the initial model, all four scales and Overall Quality were forced into the model with Volunteer as the dependent variable. Items were then removed in order of the smallest contribution to explained variation. The initial model produced a statistically significant R² and explained approximately 12% of the variance in Volunteer. However, only the Tangible variable produced a significant coefficient (beta=-.25) and this coefficient was in the opposite direction from that expected. Variables were removed until only statistically significant variables remained. The final model yielded two service quality dimensions that produced a statistically significant relationship with Volunteer. Again, Tangibility produced a significant but negative beta (-.24). However, Empathy produced a statistically significant, positive beta (.2634) indicating that this dimension of perceived service quality was associated with increased willingness to volunteer.

Table 1: Multiple-Regression Full Model and Reduced Model Beta Coefficients and Explained Variation for Performance Perception Scales and Overall Quality with Willingness to Volunteer (N= 124).

	Willingness to Volunteer	
	Full Model	Reduced Model
Tangibility	-.2502 ²	-.2366 ¹
Reliability	.0975	
Responsiveness		
-Assurance	.0754	
Empathy	.2980 ²	.2634 ¹
Overall Quality	-.2246	
R-Square	.1174 ³	.1006 ³

¹P<.05 (1-Tail). Null hypothesis rejected.

²Coefficient statistically significant (P<.05, 2-Tail) but in direction opposite from that hypothesized. Null hypothesis accepted.

³P<.05 (2-Tail).

Conclusions

This study has also shown the importance of certain aspects of perceived service quality to volunteerism. Surprisingly, positive perceptions of physical features tended to be associated with reduced willingness to volunteer -- possibly due to creating an image of less need. Empathy, measured in terms of pride in schools, respect for cultural and racial diversity (in this strongly bi-racial community), perceptions of caring personal attention and images of the school system understanding what the public wants from schools, were associated with greater willingness to volunteer. This is surprising, since this population of non-parents of public school children has little direct contact with the school system and suggests that school systems, and perhaps other not-for-profit public service organizations may encourage volunteerism by emphasizing sensitivity to community desires and the ability of the public service organization to identify with non-client members of its input public as well as its client base.

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