

Service Encounter Paper



Services Marketing
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Over the course of this semester I have had an array of service encounters. While the majority of my experiences have been middle-of-the-road in terms of quality, there were a few I was delighted with and a few that were not so pleasant. Although I consider myself a passive complainer, the material I have garnered from this course has allowed me to make better judgments in assessing the quality of those encounters and the areas in which management was either lacking or excelling.

Worst Service Encounter

The worst service encounter I experienced this semester was at St. Julian's Fitness, on the morning of January 21. I have long been a member of this gym, and overall, have been pretty satisfied with the service. This particular morning, however, several small annoyances added up to one unpleasant service experience. The owners/employees were rude and unresponsive to customer requests, the towels were all taken, the paper towel dispenser was empty, and another customer disregarded gym etiquette by blasting the television instead of using headphones. Further details of the service encounter can be found in Journal Entry #1 of the Appendix.

The problems I experienced as the customer in this unsuccessful service encounter could be attributed to several underlying causes. Essentially, the organization failed to accomplish their primary objective. That is, several of my needs and expectations as a customer were not met. The sources of my dissatisfaction stemmed mainly from one of the three elements in the expanded marketing mix, people.

First, I was unhappy with my interactions with the employee who was working. After no acknowledgement when I arrived, I asked for a towel and was met with the impenitent reply "We're out." Not only was the employee curt, he made no attempt to

recover from the service failure. He acted as if nothing was wrong and left me to fend for myself. While a simple expression of regret would have been satisfactory, the employee could have taken the opportunity to really impress me as a customer. If he had offered to tell me when a clean towel might be available or even spontaneously brought one out to me, it would have turned my annoyance into real admiration.

My second interaction with this same employee resulted from yet another service failure and subsequent lack of recovery and adaptability. When I found there were no more paper towels left in the dispenser, I told the employee who assured me he would take care of it. At the time, I would have considered this a successful recovery. The employee acknowledged the problem and took responsibility. An hour later, however, the same dispenser was still empty. While it appeared that the employee recovered from the service failure, it turned out he failed to adapt to my request. Evidently, he did not recognize the seriousness of my appeal, because he promised to accommodate my need, and then never followed through.

Another person who negatively affected my perception of service quality was a fellow customer. It is common gym etiquette to always use headphones when listening to music or watching television, and even then, to keep the volume at a considerate level. Given this expectation, it was extremely distressing when another gym member got on a machine next to me and turned the volume on the monitor all the way up. First, I must admit, as a customer I did not perform my duty by saying something to the fellow customer or complaining to an employee. I see the same people almost everyday, so I would feel uncomfortable being put in the position to remind other members of simple workout etiquette. Having said this, I still considered this inadequate coping by the

employee. I expect an organization such as a gym to encourage common courtesy among members and intervene when members fail to respect others' experiences. An employee could have politely asked the person to use headphones or at least turn the volume down.

Although, it is too late for this service provider to change my perceptions of that particular service encounter, there are several strategies they could implement to ensure that future encounters result in higher satisfaction. Before, the firm can make any improvements, however, it is necessary for them to perform some form of research that can identify common service failure points. The two techniques that would allow this small, locally owned operation to achieve their objectives at a low cost and low to moderate effort are complaint solicitation and critical incident studies. First, a simple box for comment cards encourages customer feedback and provides passive complaint types, such as myself, an opportunity to make anonymous comments. In addition, using the critical incident technique, several customers could be asked to provide verbatim stories about past satisfying and dissatisfying encounters they have had at St. Julian's. Using these two research methods, St. Julian's should be able to emerge with a strong sense of customer requirements, common service failure points and both desirable and undesirable employee behaviors.

Even without formal research, there are a few crucial improvements I suggest St. Julian's make. First, to improve service recovery, St. Julian's should employ a fail-safe strategy. For instance, to avoid running out of towels, the firm should invest in enough that they can run a load of laundry and still have plenty of clean ones available for customers. A second strategy that should be implemented is for employees to act quickly in the event that a service failure does occur. Employees should be trained to respond to

complaints and requests immediately and not promise to take action, then not follow through. When I informed the employee that they were out of paper towels, he should have taken care of it right away, instead of just saying he would.

A final action that would improve the service quality provided by St. Julian's is to encourage employees to get to know customers and perform more spontaneous charitable acts. Gym members are notorious for starting an exercise program, only to quit a few weeks later. If employees encourage and support customers in their efforts, they are more likely to stick with their exercise program and renew their membership. In effect, by building social bonds between employees and customers, St. Julian's can strengthen brand loyalty.

Best Service Encounter

While eating out is increasingly regarded as a routine occurrence in American society, I still consider it a rare treat. Because I reserve dining out for special occasions, I typically go into a restaurant with higher expectations and a narrower zone of tolerance than more frequent diners. One restaurant that continually exceeds my expectations is Yoko, a Japanese restaurant on Dussel Drive in Maumee, Ohio. During a recent visit there, my friend Heather and I were met with prompt, friendly service, adaptable service employees, and delicious food. A more detailed account of this encounter can be found in Journal Entry #3 of the Appendix.

Several factors influenced my overall satisfaction with this service encounter, but it was my perception of the three elements of evidence in service quality – people, physical evidence, and process - that really made the encounter memorable. It is by no accident that Yoko repeatedly shines in all three of these areas. The firm obviously

understands how each element influences customers and uses this knowledge to their advantage.

First, Yoko employees are trained to be responsive, reliable and empathetic. We were greeted by our waitress immediately and asked our seating preference. When we ordered, I requested a specially made sushi roll and a salad with dressing on the side. The waitress readily adapted to my needs and clearly explained the cost addition that the request would entail. Yoko employees also know how to placate a service delivery failure without losing their footing. When our waitress brought out my salad and I pointed out that the dressing was already on it, she quickly recovered by apologizing and bringing me a new one. In addition, Yoko employees are encouraged to exhibit spontaneity. At the end of the meal our waitress anticipated our needs by offering to provide separate checks, even though we forgot to tell her that in the beginning. In a sit down restaurant such as Yoko, the wait staff can make or break a customer's perception of service quality. Yoko employees provide friendly, dependable service and make the customer's experience pleasurable.

Second, the physical evidence at Yoko is very effective. The servicescape facilitates interpersonal usage and has a reasonably elaborate set up. The dining area is relatively small, but feels spacious due to the high ceiling. The décor is all Asian inspired, with one entire wall painted as a Japanese scene. There is a large bar at the back of the room where you can sit and eat or just go over to watch the chefs prepare sushi. The lighting is soft, but not too intimate. Orchestral music plays at a moderate volume in the background and the tables are separated enough that other customers' conversations are not distracting. During this particular encounter, we were seated at a comfortable

booth right by a window, so we were almost in our own little world and could watch the snow fall outside. The entire servicescape at Yoko really creates a calming and peaceful vibe that elicits positive emotions within customers and enhances their perception of service quality.

Yoko also provides useful tangibles, another important element of physical evidence. On each table were table tents, which showed pictures of some of the sushi. The menu had a generous number of options and provided descriptions of the various types of sushi, sashimi, and dinner plates. This helpful addition to the menu not only facilitates the ordering process, it differentiates Yoko from other Japanese restaurants. Perhaps the most critical type of tangible, the food, was also excellent. Heather and I both ordered a sushi roll, which came with Yoko's signature soup and salad. As I stated above, I had requested that my roll be made differently than normal. The chef did such a superb job that we almost did not want to ruin the impressive presentation of the food by eating it. When we finally gave in, it was well worth it. The food was delicious and did not make us sick, which is always a miniscule concern when eating raw fish.

Finally, Yoko utilizes a process that is reminiscent of an Asian dining experience, while still catering to the modern American customer. Dining at a Japanese restaurant can be intimidating for some diners, but Yoko makes the process easy and enjoyable. The actions required by the customer are straightforward and the operational flow of activities is similar to any other casual dining experience. My friend and I were greeted by a hostess, ushered to a table, given a menu and met by our waitress. As I mentioned earlier, the menus provided a helpful description for every item offered and the waitress was happy to answer questions and make suggestions. Once we ordered, we received our

drinks within a few minutes, followed by soup, salad and appetizers, and then the main course in about 15 minutes. The waitress brought the bill shortly after we had finished our meal and declined dessert. The entire process was efficient and timely, but never rushed. The servicescape was so calming that speed was less of an issue. We even felt welcome to linger after we paid the bill to relax and chat. The process of service delivery was familiar and enjoyable.

Yoko understands the importance of the expanded marketing mix for the services and capitalizes on its ability to influence customer perceptions. By utilizing thorough employee training methods, appealing physical evidence, and an enjoyable service delivery process, Yoko sets the stage for successful service encounters and enhances customers' perception of service quality.

Lessons Learned

Every service encounter or cascade of encounters is a chance for a service firm to create a positive image of itself in the customer's mind and can be critical in determining customer satisfaction and loyalty. Before preparing for this paper, I rarely paid attention to the factors that influenced my perceptions of service quality and satisfaction. Now, I realize how important it is for any service firm to understand the impact of these factors and control them to ensure that they have the intended effect on customers. In addition, I developed a deeper understanding of the three additional P's in the marketing mix, people, process, and physical evidence and the critical role they play in providing evidence of service quality.

This assignment has not only empowered me as a service customer, but also as a future employee in the business world. As services continue to become more prevalent in

all business industries, it is important to understand the unique concerns and considerations that influence customer perceptions and contribute to successful services marketing. The ability to evaluate service encounters and suggest appropriate strategies for future marketing efforts is a talent that will assist me in any industry I enter.

Service Encounter

Journal Entry: 1

Name: [REDACTED]

Name of Firm: St. Julian's Fitness

Type of Service: Fitness Center

Date of Encounter: January 21, 2005

Time Encounter Occurred: 9:30 a.m.

What specific circumstances led to this encounter?

I have been a member of St. Julian's for almost 7 years now. Like most mornings, I went to workout on the elliptical trainer.

Exactly what did the firm/employee say or do?

Like most weekday mornings, the owners, who are father and son, were both working. First, when I walked in and scanned my ID at the desk, the son (we'll call him Sean) did not look up from what he was doing to greet me. There were no towels lying out, so I asked him for one. I was told simply, they are all dirty. Annoyed, since this happens frequently, I continued into the cardio area and set myself up on a machine. I went over to the paper towel dispenser to grab a makeshift towel only to find the container was empty. I told Sean the dispenser needed to be refilled and ran to the bathroom to grab some paper towels from there.

Next, in the middle of my workout another member came and got on the machine a few down from me. He proceeded to turn on the T.V. connected to his machine and instead of using earphones, cranked the volume up to full. So for the remaining 25 minutes I had to listen to the hoops and hollers of Jerry Springer.

When I had finished my workout I returned to the paper towel dispenser to get some clean towels to wipe down the machine. It was now fifty minutes after I had told Sean there were no towels left and the dispenser was still empty.

Frustrated, I finished stretching, collected my belongings, and left.

How would you rate your level of satisfaction with this encounter?

1 2 3 4 5 6 7

Extremely Dissatisfied

Extremely Satisfied

What exactly made you feel that way?

For one thing, I am paying a good chunk of change to go to this gym, so I expect to get a clean towel when I go in. This happens at least once a week and I am getting rather irritated. In addition, if a customer reports that something is empty, the staff should make an effort to refill it in a timely manner. Second, the owners and even the staff are not particularly friendly people. They don't have to sing and dance when I walk in, but they could at least offer a friendly hello. Finally, I find it greatly disrespectful when other members forgo earphones or play their media in a way that disrupts fellow gym-goers. There is something called gym etiquette and I expect it to be enforced when necessary.

What could the employee/firm have done to make you happier with the encounter?

Like I mentioned above, providing clean towels is a big one. I understand people steal them sometimes and it costs money to replace them, but that is a built in cost of doing business. The least they can do is apologize for the inconvenience and perhaps offer to bring one out to you when they are dry. More over, if there are no clean towels, keeping the paper towel dispenser filled should be a top priority.

Next, I think they should make it a point to ensure that members are respecting the exercise environment. They should hang a sign or request that members use headphones and set the volume at a reasonable level.

Finally, since they are providing a service, I think they need to make more of effort to be friendly. A gym is a place where customers return on a daily basis, so building a friendly relationship should be easy and natural.

How likely is it that you will go back to this service firm?

1 2 3 4 5 6

7

Extremely Unlikely

Extremely Likely

Service Encounter

Journal Entry: 3

Name: [REDACTED]

Name of Firm: Yoko

Date of Encounter: January 29, 2005

Type of Service: Restaurant

Time Encounter Occurred: 5:00 p.m.

What specific circumstances led to this encounter?

After a day of shopping, my friend Heather and I stopped at one of my favorite Japanese restaurants famished and ready for some sushi.

Exactly what did the firm/employee say or do?

We were approached immediately by a waitress and asked whether we preferred a table or booth. It was early and there was only one other group of customers, so we expected and received prompt service. Our waitress immediately took our drink order and left us to browse the menu. When we signaled, she came to take our order and readily accommodated my special sushi request, clearly explaining the subsequent price change. We waited only 15 or so minutes for our food, but when she set down my salad I noticed the dressing was not on the side as I had requested. I mentioned the mistake for which she quickly apologized and brought me out a new one. The meal was delicious. The waitress came back a little later to refill our drinks and see how everything tasted. As we finished up, she asked if we wanted any desert. When we told her no, she left it at that and asked if we were ready for the check. She even offered to bring us separate ones, which we had forgotten to originally request. She quickly returned with our change and wished us a nice evening.

How would you rate your level of satisfaction with this encounter?

1 2 3 4 5 6

7

Extremely Dissatisfied

Extremely Satisfied

What exactly made you feel that way?

The entire dining experience was delightful, as it always is when I go there. The waitress was friendly and attentive. The atmosphere was mellow and calming. And most important, the food was fresh and tasty. With great service, great company, and great food, who could complain?

