



Conceptual Directions of Public Service Quality Improvement in Public Catering Companies

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ABSTRACT

The article suggests and substantiates the conceptual directions for improving the quality of public services in public catering companies, which correspond to the problem of eliminating the discrepancies between consumer expectations and perceptions, defined by the content of five-stage model of service quality (The gap's model of service quality) and typical problems of services: Lack or inaccuracy of information on consumers' expectations; lack of service standards provided to consumers; violation of service rules by company's personnel; discrepancy between the declared service quality and real condition. We have suggested a number of managerial decisions aimed at the elimination and minimization of the problems during the provision of public services in public catering companies. According to the completed study we can make a conclusion that for public catering companies the most urgent problem is the twofold development of service standards: Procedural and direct communication with consumers.

Keywords: Public Catering Company, Services Quality, Conceptual Directions, Services Standards, Service Personnel

JEL Classifications: L89, M59, M12

1. INTRODUCTION

In the course of the whole human history the problem of nourishment has been and still remains one of the most important; while the production, sales of products and supporting them public services is a traditional type of activity of service companies (Teplov and Boryaev, 2006; Korolev, 2012).

Public catering is an independent branch of the economy, which performs the functions of production, sales and organization of consumption of finished and semi-finished culinary products. In the contemporary competitive environment of consumer market the content of the public catering companies' activity is expanding thanks to the service component (Isayenko and Pasechko, 2011), i.e., the expansion of the range of public services in the process of their provision.

The problem of services quality (Belostotskaya and Kruglov, 2009) is urgent for all companies, which are functioning in the contemporary market system, characterized by instability and mobility of competition. In the said conditions the prospects for the development of public catering companies are determined by the dominant role of the quality of services and in particular by the quality of attendance. It is connected with the fact that the majority of the public catering companies possess the same level of technological capacities, use analogical technologies in making culinary products, in other words the quality of products is perceived by consumers as a basic component of a service. Thus, it is clear that the quality of attendance is becoming the key factor of public catering companies' competitiveness (Isayenko and Korolev, 2014).

It is necessary to note that the scientific development of the problem of the attendance quality at public catering companies

cannot be regarded as completed. The changing conditions require the development of the theory and practice of improving the quality (Deming, 1994; Isayenko and Isayenko, 1999) of attendance in public catering companies. The applied methodological approaches to the assessment of the attendance quality and its management in service companies do not completely take into account the peculiarities of the process of attendance of public catering services consumers.

In their strive to meet the public needs for the quality of services the management of the public catering company accumulates the necessary data base reflecting the results of the service quality study. The next stage of quality management (Harrington, 1990; Evans, 2007; Opolchenov, 2008), faced by the employees, is the development of managerial decisions (Kirillova et al., 2008), directed at improving the quality of provided public services.

2. METHODOLOGY

In our opinion, it is possible to define the conceptual directions for improving the quality of public services in public catering companies with the help of the Gap's model of service quality worked out by Parasuraman, Zaitaml and Berry.

The said model describes five discrepancies, which are the reasons for consumers' dissatisfaction with services (Gronroos, 1984). But, in our opinion, the said model can be used for the presentation of service quality, as a consumer while assessing the service quality assesses not only the result, but the process of interaction with the provider (service). The Table 1 clearly shows the discrepancies and the problems provoked by them in the process of public services providing.

Consequently, managerial decisions directed at elimination or minimization of the said problems, are the directions for improving the quality of public services. We believe it is possible to present the conceptual directions for improving the quality of public services by public catering companies graphically (Figure 1).

In our opinion, in order to define the ways and methods of eliminating the problems, which arises in the process of services provision in public catering companies it is necessary to consider each problem in detail.

3. RESULTS

3.1. Directions for Solving the Problem Connected with Lack or Inaccuracy of the Information on Consumers' Expectations

The first problem in services provision arises when the perceptions of the public catering company's management in respect of consumers' expectations differ from the expectations of consumers themselves. Due to a number of reasons the company's management can be unaware of what is important for consumers or possess inaccurate information on expectations.

Due to this public catering companies should have regular consumers' surveys (Tarasova and Timoshenko, 2009) (possibly assessing the quality of services), striving to achieve the highest objectivity of results through continuous improvement of survey techniques.

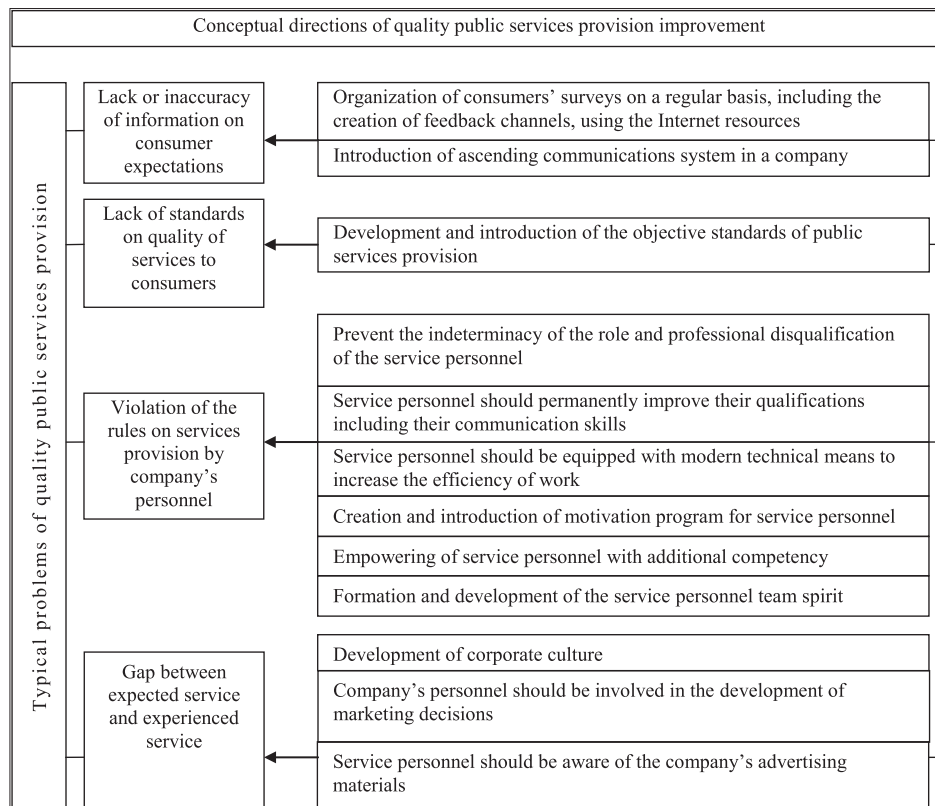
Besides this, the management of the said companies should provide their consumers with the opportunity of sending them the information through feedback channels (Tarasova and Timoshenko, 2011), for which it is necessary to establish the open communication channels. It would make it possible to reveal the problems in services provision, and thus understand what consumers expect of services and determine the ways for elimination of the arising discrepancies.

In the modern information and communication society, when the level of computer literacy and the opportunities for fast access to the Internet are improving every year the management of the public catering companies should use the online surveys to the full extent (Tarasova and Timoshenko, 2009). The access to the survey can be obtained on the company's site, or if the latter is not available - on one of the information portals. Thanks to the information obtained through the continuous online survey the management of the said companies would be able to quickly respond to the demands and needs of consumers. Similar to other feedback means, online survey is the way to reveal urgent directions for improving the quality of services.

One more way to solve the problem of lack of the information is the introduction of a system, which would make it possible for the management to hear the opinion of their employees.

Table 1: Discrepancies in accordance with the GAP model and problems caused by them in the process of services providing

Discrepancies	Problems
Gap between consumer expectation and management perception	The management or service provider does not correctly perceive what the customers want or need
Gap between management perception and service quality specification	The management or service provider might correctly perceive what the customer wants, but may not set a performance standard
Gap between service quality specification and service delivery	Service personnel poor training, incapability or unwillingness to meet the set service standard
Gap between service delivery and external communication	Assumed expectations are not fulfilled at the time of service delivery
Gap between expected service and experienced service	Consumer misinterprets the service quality

Figure 1: Conceptual directions of the quality of public services provision improvement in public catering companies

The introduction of the system of ascending communications requires definite managerial actions. It is necessary to encourage the employees, who are in direct contact with consumers to express their opinions on improving the quality of services in their full variety and not only those, which are useful from the point of view of the management. Remuneration for valuable idea and its prompt implementation in practice provides for continuous enthusiasm.

The success of such system depends on how the management receives the messages on problems in services provision. If the punishment aspect prevails, the personnel will have no will to inform on the problems in services provision. On the other hand, if the management's priority is the identification of problems and development of measures on eliminating such things in future, the personnel will be willing to share the information on the problems with the management.

The management of the public catering companies should remember that their personnel is a part of the provided service. In this connection company's efforts should be directed not only at external environment, market, consumers, but also at the internal environment and personnel (Isayenko and Nagapetyants, 2009; Lisenko, 2010). External marketing brings consumers for the company, but in order to keep them we need the internal marketing. The essence of the internal marketing is in the organization of interrelations between personnel, management and company's divisions on the basis of marketing principles (Khlebovich, 2007).

Thus, the goal of the internal marketing in public catering companies is the attraction, keeping, training and motivation of high quality personnel, capable and willing to provide quality services to consumers. Application of internal marketing concept (Gronroos, 1990) at public catering units would make it possible to increase the opportunity to efficiently satisfy the needs of consumers through the satisfaction of the needs of the service personnel and thus increase their loyalty to the company (Teplov 2014a).

3.2. Direction for Solving the Problem Connected with the Lack of Services Provision Standards to Consumers at a Company

In our opinion, a second problem of services provision at public catering companies arises due to the lack of services provision rules. As the survey showed lack of services provision rules at public catering companies is predetermined by the following:

- The management does not regard the quality of services provision as strategic goals;
- The management is sure that the services provision cannot correspond to consumers expectations;
- The management is sure that the process of services provision cannot be standardized;
- The rules exist but they are not clearly defined without taking into account consumers' expectations.

In general, services standards are the rules, instructions, regulations, which each employee must perform in accordance with their duties (Mill, 2009).

We do believe that it is a mistake to consider that service standards are a kind of dogma, while they only give the direction: How to address a consumer, how to avoid a dispute with him/her, at what time to approach a client and offer help, how to tell about the company and services. Consequently, there is always a place for improvisation in the standard frameworks.

It is necessary to remember, that the basis of the standards should be the results of the study of demands (Kottler et al. 1998), expectations and preferences of the public catering company's services consumers. Then the said information should be brought to the company's service personnel in the form of the definite and obligatory rules of behavior, regulated in instructions, provisions, company's standards, technical documentation and current operational decisions.

According to the completed study we can make a conclusion that for public catering companies the most urgent problem is the development of service standards in two spheres: Procedural and directly in the sphere of communication with consumers.

Performance area combines the service aspects connected with all actions directed at providing a consumer with ordered dishes and attendance. Under the sphere of communication in respect of the object of our study we understand the elements of social interaction of the public catering company's service personnel with a consumer of the service.

In order to more successfully introduce and apply service standards at public catering companies it is necessary to develop them taking into account the rules of the international etiquette and the specificity of the particular company.

To develop the service standards public catering companies can use different methods, each of them having both advantages and disadvantages.

The method "search for ready decisions" means that already developed findings are taken as the basis in the process of standardization. As the sources of information one can use collections of standards, developed by the specialists and experts in the sphere of public catering, experience and findings of competitors, standards of service companies with similar technologies of work.

The essence of the method "play and action modeling" can be formulated as the "method of trials and mistakes." Different scenarios of service are tried during training while using the said method.

The method "best employees" is regarded by most of the management as the last one when developing the standards. The given method means that the management chooses the most successful employee, in our case from the contact zone and his/her activity is taken as the basis for the development of standards (Mill, 2009).

In our opinion, in order to achieve the maximum practical result in the process of standards development it is reasonable to use

these and other methods as a complex depending on particular situations and business demands.

3.3. Directions for Solving the Problem Connected with the Violation of the Service Rules by the Company's Personnel

The said problem arises due to the fact that the standards are developed, they are in force but the personnel ignore them or are not able to cope with them.

In our opinion, there are several reasons due to which the public catering company personnel do not attempt to provide services of the necessary quality. The personnel can be unaware to a great extent of the requirements to them or the personnel don't possess the necessary level of qualifications. The personnel can believe that they will not be able to satisfy all demands or consumers or the profile of their training doesn't correspond to the work they do, or they lack necessary means to follow the set standards of service. Public catering companies can also provide rewards for quality services, or the service personnel are out of control over the compliance with service standards or there is lack of coordination in the actions of the personnel and management.

3.3.1. Solution of the problem connected with the indefinite role of the personnel

There can arise a situation in public catering companies when an employee is unaware of what is expected from his/her actions by the boss and a consumer of services, which leads to the indefiniteness of the role. The indefiniteness of the role is the result of the insufficient information or training of an employee to perform his/her duties (Mill, 2009). The public catering company's service personnel should clearly understand what they must do, at which elements of their duties to focus their attention, how and for what they can be rewarded and how efficiently they perform their duties.

We believe that with a lack of necessary skills in the personnel the public catering company's management should provide them with the opportunity of training, with the view of ensuring the necessary standard of service in future. Often the training of the contact zone personnel in public catering companies is done in the workplace.

The process of services provision in public catering companies consists of the set of basic skills (Zayko and Dzhum, 2008), which the contact zone personnel should possess:

- Loading and carrying of a tray with dishes and drinks (used plates);
- Skills of handling table setting;
- Table cleaning while clients are eating, etc.

In the restaurants of "luxury" class with the focus on the high level of comfort the service personnel are required to know foreign languages and different types of service.

We do believe that the service personnel of public catering companies besides their indispensable skills need specific skills, which are not necessary for the work in other divisions of the company. The public catering companies' service personnel for

their successful work should possess the skills of interpersonal communications, the ability to change the behavior depending on the reaction of clients.

With professional training in public catering companies considerably more attention is given to the technical skills of service rather than to communication skills. Nevertheless, it is generally accepted that high quality service to a greater extent is determined exactly by communication skills of the service personnel (Gronroos, 1994). In our opinion, public catering companies' managers have two options: Hire personnel with the skill of interpersonal communications or develop them in their employees in the course of training. Public catering companies' service personnel in their interaction with services consumers should be able to properly react on the complaints of clients.

3.3.2. Application of modern technologies

In our opinion, public catering companies' service personnel should possess not only professional skills but technological means, which increase the efficiency of the duties accomplishment. Application of modern technologies would make it possible for the public catering companies to increase the speed and quality of their services. Recently the public catering companies have been enjoying POS terminals, which relieve the service personnel from the necessity of continuous movements between the hall and the kitchen and, consequently, allowing more time for communication with consumers to more fully meet their demands. There are public catering companies where the priority is given to PDA, and in this case the service personnel send the order to the kitchen right from consumer's table. As a result of modern technologies application the personnel's task while receiving the order is to correctly and promptly input the order into the system and the information is automatically transmitted to the necessary division (kitchen, confectionary shop or bar).

Moreover, the service personnel can also have a device, which signals about the call from a customer (if tables are equipped with call buttons) or readiness of the dish in the kitchen.

3.3.3. Service personnel motivation program

In our opinion, the management of the public catering company, whose goal is to achieve high quality services, is required to introduce the motivation program, which would make it possible to remunerate the personnel, whose actions ensure the necessary level of services. To ensure the quality of services it is necessary to develop the system of assessment of the service personnel actions. The said systems should include high standards of services, but alongside with this, the personnel should consider them reasonable and just. The programs should be developed for a long-term period.

3.3.4. Empowering service personnel

It is important to understand, that public catering companies' service personnel can influence the process of service and control complex situations; due to this they are to a less extent under stress and excessive load. A waiter is in the hardest situation as he/she is the final link of the service process having to listen to complaints on possible faults in any part of the company. In this connection waiters should be given additional authority for fixing

conflicts and correct situations (Mill, 2009). Instead of retelling the administrator the gist of the problem and listening to instructions the waiter would be able to decide what to do to solve the problem.

Thus, as a result of the empowering the public catering company service personnel with additional authority the time of reaction to consumers' complaints will be shorter and the personnel, being aware of their responsibilities, would be able to influence the quality of services.

3.3.5. Team style of company's work

In each working team there is competition and public catering companies are not the exception. Very often in public catering companies we face the rivalry between the work-shifts. By no means, the work in such a team provokes the employees to change their jobs, as for the majority of people friendly relations and positive micro climate in the working team are very important.

The team style of activity should become an integral part of the corporate culture of the public catering companies. Alongside with this, corporate culture is a complex of values, norms and rules, adopted by any public catering company and determined by its goals (Kabushkin and Bondarenko, 2008). Corporate culture is an important motivator and provides for the development of client's confidence in the stability of services (Haxever et al. 2002), provided by any public catering company.

In our opinion, correctly developed and efficiently functioning corporate culture provides for the improvement of service quality, which, as a result, positively influences the performance results of public catering companies.

3.4. Direction for Solving the Problem Connected with the Discrepancy between the Expected Service and Experienced Service

The fourth problem, arising during provision of services to clients at public catering companies is the excessive promises given by a company. The goal of the said promises is the attraction of consumers (Angel et al. 1999). If a consumer visits a public catering company with excessive expectations, the service personnel, whatever qualifications they can possess, will not be able to offer a client what he/she expected.

In our opinion, to find the way out of this situation public catering company's service personnel should be involved in the development of market decisions in order to ensure direct connection between the promises and real capacities of the company. The service personnel should be informed on the company's advertising materials for them to know what has been promised to clients, i.e., they should be aware of consumers' expectations.

4. DISCUSSION

4.1. The Reasons for Emergence of Problems During the Provision of Services to Consumers

As the present study at public catering companies showed internal communications are of descending nature - from the management

to employees, down to the lowest level. Often the management of the said companies is sure in its knowledge how to solve the problems connected with provision of services, and the employees' opinions are disregarded. But the farther from consumers and their demands are the decision-makers the higher is the possibility that they will lose the understanding of what is the most important for consumers. Moreover, the contact zone personnel interact more often with consumers than the management. The service personnel are better aware which aspects or services satisfy the consumers and which do not.

In our opinion the public catering company management should regard the personnel as specific consumers and provide them with resources (salary, opportunity to realize their professional and creative potential, etc.). In its turn any company needs the personnel resources and personnel itself as personnel professional qualities help public catering company to operate.

In our opinion, the standards should clearly define what and in what way the personnel should do in the process of service provision to clients and while interacting with each other. Some managers believe that due to the peculiarities of services provision - non-material and individual nature of attendance - it is not possible to set the standards (Tarasova and Kadatskaya, 2013). The most widespread reason of resistance to the introduction of standards is the contradiction between the rigidity of standards and the necessity to be flexible to what happens in the internal and external environment of any public catering company.

In our opinion, while developing and introducing the service standards at public catering companies it is necessary to follow the following principles:

- Focus on consumers' expectations - standards should take into account the said expectations;
- Summarizing the best practices of competitors, other branches and spheres of services;
- "One team - same standards" - standards are obligatory for all, regardless from the position, agreement or disagreement with standards;
- Continuous development - standards should improve and change.

It is necessary to remember that the developed standards in future will serve as the basis for the assessment of the service personnel actions. Lack of standards makes the assessment of the personnel's work more difficult.

4.2. The Reasons for Violation of Attendance Rules by the Company's Personnel

A considerable difficulty in the work of the public catering companies' contact zone personnel is connected with the fact that actually they have two bosses, a manager and a consumer of service with different demands. A service consumer expects to get a quality service while public catering company's manager is interested in the amount of the bill and the turnover of seats. If the public catering company's service personnel are aware that they are not able to meet all demands, required by the manager and consumer there occurs a role conflict. It leads to nervous and

emotional overload as the service personnel are in continuous stress, which, in the very end, leads to professional burnout and depletion of emotional and energy resources.

In our opinion, the sharpness of the role conflict can be decreased by the setting of standards of actions and behavior, the basis of which should be consumers' expectations, but not those of the management of any public catering company.

At public catering companies there is an opinion that the work connected with the direct provision of services to clients is not remunerated highly enough, which hampers the opportunity of attracting highly qualified personnel and, as a result, public catering companies' managers make a compromise: Hire not those with whom they are satisfied but those who agree to get the job.

But recently the public catering companies' managers have become aware that the service personnel work as they are paid (Teplov, 2014b).

We do believe that to build a working team, to create the climate favorable for joint teamwork is an important challenge for the public catering companies' management. The public catering companies' management should inform the working team of the principles and importance of team-building. Well organized and efficient team work of the personnel will lead to the improvement of the quality of services and, consequently, to the increase of remuneration.

In our opinion, the public catering companies while developing corporate culture, should consider the key values, which determine the interrelations between the personnel and consumers, relations to their activity (pride for the profession), and the quality of provided services (competence and relation to work process).

5. CONCLUSION

Thus, in order to improve the quality of public services in public catering companies we have developed the conceptual directions, which ensure it. The initial idea for their development was the problem of the elimination of discrepancies between consumers' expectations and their perception, defined by the content of the five-stage model of service quality (The gap's model of service quality). In our opinion, the real elimination of the discrepancies between the expectations and service perception by consumers is only possible with clear understanding of the problems, characteristic of the said process at the contemporary stage of services organization. Accordingly, have revealed and substantiated typical problems of service quality provided to consumers in public catering companies: Lack or inaccuracy of information on consumers' expectations; lack of service rules provided to consumers; violation of service standards by the company's personnel; discrepancy between the expected service and experienced service.

But in its practice any public catering company management is limited in resources and does not have the opportunity for simultaneous elimination of all the problems existing in public

services provision. For clear and targeting managerial decisions the management of the said companies should possess the efficient technique for the assessment of the quality of public services. We believe that the said technique should not be of universal nature and applied to all existing types and classes of the catering sector companies as each type of the company is characterized by a specific set of features.

Further prospects of the study on the suggested topic are connected with the development of methodological provisions on the formation of the system of public services quality management in public catering companies.

In our opinion, the obtained results of the study make a certain contribution in the development of theoretical provisions, managerial and methodological set of tools for improving the quality of public services in public catering companies.

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