

**SERVICE QUALITY AND
CUSTOMERS' WILLINGNESS TO
PAY MORE FOR TRAVEL
SERVICES**

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Abstract

Increasingly sophisticated and price conscious consumers have combined with forces of globalisation and electronic commerce to create new challenges for travel agents. To maintain efficiency and profitability, travel agents need to know the links between service quality and customers' willingness to pay more (WTPM). These links are explored through measuring customer perceptions ($N=122$) of service quality, loyalty and WTPM. The results revealed firstly that while many consumers were able to pay more for travel services, fewer were willing to do so. Secondly, overall service quality and its underlying dimensions were positively associated with selected WTPM items. These findings support and extend previous studies on the service quality – behavioural intentions link and provide practical implications for the travel industry in relation to a differentiated price and service strategy.

SERVICE QUALITY AND CUSTOMERS' WILLINGNESS TO PAY MORE FOR TRAVEL SERVICES

The tourism industry is the world's largest service industry with receipts from international tourism reaching US\$476 billion in 2000 (WTO, 2001). The industry offers combined and often packaged services to potential tourists over chronologically discrete periods. Even though travel involves a number of service providers, tourists are likely to perceive their travels as continuous leisure experiences. Flaws in the quality of specific services can therefore engender negative perceptions that contribute to the overall travel episode (Laws, 2000).

Travel agents have traditionally played a key customer service role as their obligations encompass overall trip planning and coordination (Klenosky & Gitelson, 1998). In the face of shrinking commission margins exerted through, for example, the market power of new airline alliances, travel agents are experiencing increasing pressures to adopt user-pays strategies for more complex services (Poon, 2001). Together, these developments increase the requirement for travel agents to offer improved customer services at competitive prices in order to ensure ongoing profitability.

Given the emerging challenges created for travel agents by the forces of globalisation, the related development of IT, and the increasingly sophisticated and price conscious consumer market, surprisingly little work has been done on the quality of travel agents' services (Marsh, 1994; Oppermann, 1999; Wardell, 1998). In his review of recent developments in service quality research in tourism, Laws (2000) suggests that tourism researchers are not engaging fully with the depth of quality issues evident in the services management literature and, consequently, he calls for more research from a variety of perspectives.

In the services literature, there is general empirical support for the suggestion that service quality affects customers' loyalty and behavioural intentions (Cronin, Brady and Hult, 2000; Shemwell, Yavas & Bilgin, 1998; Taylor and Baker, 1994). It follows that travel agents would benefit through knowledge of how service quality encourages customer loyalty. Ensuring loyalty through focussed service will assist the maintenance of market share and repeat purchase behaviour in an industry characterised by both increasing concentration and pressures toward disintermediation (Buhalis, 1998; Lewis & Talalayevsky, 1997; Oppermann, 1999; Poon, 2001; Wardell, 1998). Considering this, Buhalis (1998, p. 416) suggests that two distinct strategies will "probably dominate" future travel services; travel agents can either offer a personalised and customised service where customers are willing to pay a premium price, or offer a standardised high volume service competing with other providers on price.

Price sensitivity, as reported in the services literature, encompasses willingness to pay more (WTPM) and is considered a component of behavioural intentions. Behavioural intentions also includes company loyalty, switching behaviour, and dissatisfaction responses (Zeithaml, Berry and Parasuraman, 1996). The emphasis of previous services research has been on elements of behavioural intentions such as feelings of loyalty and word-of-mouth behaviour; links between service quality and price sensitivity are relatively under-researched. This research is particularly pertinent for a travel services environment characterised firstly by decreasing travel agent commissions and secondly, where price sensitive consumers can now access travel information and make direct travel bookings through the Internet (Lewis, Semeijn, & Talalayevsky, 1998). However, there is no empirical evidence of a specific link between service quality and its dimensions to customers' price sensitivity. This study therefore aims to explore the relationship between service quality and price sensitivity, using customers' WTPM for travel services.

Firstly, we briefly review the recent literature on service quality in travel services, customer loyalty and willingness to pay more, and develop a research proposition consistent with the research aim. The research design is then described, and the results of an empirical study in travel services are discussed. The paper concludes with managerial implications and recommendations for future research.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Service quality in travel services

In the service quality and customer satisfaction literatures, there is consensus that service quality is an important driving force in attracting and retaining customers (Bloemer, de Ruyter & Wetzels, 1999; Cronin et al., 2000; Oliver, 1993; Parasuraman, Zeithaml & Berry, 1988; Zeithaml et al., 1996). However, in the development of knowledge about service quality, there has been considerable discussion and extended debate about its definition, the role of expectations, the best means of measuring it, its dimensions in different industries, and its behavioural implications (Cronin and Taylor, 1992; Dean, 1999; Peter, Churchill & Brown, 1993; Zeithaml, 2000; Zeithaml, Berry & Parasuraman, 1993). Service quality is conceptualised for this study as an attitude, based on a cognitive, evaluative, and objective assessment of the overall superiority of a service (Roest and Pieters, 1997).

Despite the enormous volume of literature on service quality in the services marketing area, there is a lack of research on service quality in travel services. Notable exceptions include Ryan & Cliff's (1997) study based on the well-known SERVQUAL instrument. This study supported the instrument's reliability, although the five dimensions of SQ found in many studies (see Parasuraman, Zeithaml & Berry, 1994) were not obtained for this sample. Heung and Chu (2000) developed their own instrument in relation to Hong Kong customers' choice of travel agent when purchasing package tours. High ranked attributes included the agent's reputation, attitude of staff, value for money of the tour package, and willingness of staff to provide prompt service. Hudson and Shephard (1998) considered the attributes that consumers and producers rate as important to a specific destination and demonstrate how they can be used to develop service strategy. While these studies provide interesting results, they are essentially concerned with identifying and comparing the attributes that constitute consumers' perceptions of service quality.

As mentioned, many perceptual studies of service quality use the SERVQUAL instrument, originally proposed by Parasuraman et al. (1988). SERVQUAL studies usually determine expectations and perceptions of quality separately and apply the disconfirmation paradigm. This paradigm presumes that service quality is the difference between perceptions and expectations. However, methodologies that employ difference scores and subsequently use them in multivariate analysis have been challenged and criticised by researchers (Brown, Churchill & Peter, 1993; Cronin and Taylor 1992; Peter et al. 1993; Teas 1993). Problems have been demonstrated on the basis of reliability, validity and variance distribution restriction leading to reservations about the subsequent use of gap scores in multivariate analysis. Consequently, researchers have recommended the use of perceptions scores for measuring service quality, without reference to customer expectations (see Dabholkar, Shepherd, & Thorpe, 2000). Hence the items in the SERVQUAL scale are adopted and customised for this study and the average values for the dimensions of quality are based on perception scores.

The relationship between service quality and customer loyalty

While identifying attributes of quality is acknowledged as an important first step in measuring service quality, we suggest that it is more useful to determine the implications of those attributes in terms of consumers' loyalty responses. In the context of our study, loyalty is interpreted as true loyalty, rather than repeat purchasing behaviour, the latter being the actual re-buying of a brand (Bloemer and Kasper, 1995). True loyalty in this context encompasses a non-random, behavioural response that is developed from evaluation processes and manifest through ongoing commitment (Bloemer and Kasper, 1995). This is in contrast to spurious brand loyalty that is simply considered as a function of inertia. In this study, loyalty to a travel services provider is termed service loyalty. In comparison to brand loyalty (spurious or otherwise), service loyalty studies are under-represented in the literature (Bloemer et al., 1999; Javalgi and Moberg, 1997).

A number of studies suggest a significant positive relationship between service quality and customer loyalty/behavioural intentions (see, for example, Cronin et al., 2000; Shemwell et al., 1998; Taylor and Baker, 1994). In an early investigation of the loyalty construct, Parasuraman et al. (1994) developed a *behavioral intentions battery*. These authors found loyalty to consist of five factors; loyalty to company,

propensity to switch, willingness to pay more, external response to problem and internal response to problem. In a similar study, de Ruyter, Wetzels & Bloemer (1998) adopted the same scales but found three dimensions: preference, price indifference and dissatisfaction response. However, de Ruyter et al. confirmed that the necessary elements required to operationalise loyalty are captured in the behavioural intentions battery refined by Parasuraman and his co-workers (Bloemer et al., 1999; Zeithaml et al., 1996). Interestingly, price sensitivity and, in particular, WTPM emerged as the important components of behavioural intentions in these studies.

The conceptualisation of service quality described earlier is consistent with the concept of customer value as defined in the service profit chain. Customer value is a function of service quality and its cost, and this function provides the link between the organisation and its customers (Heskett, Sasser & Schlesinger, 1997). Rust and Oliver (1994, p.10) emphasise the difference between quality and value where "... value is equal to the utility of quality minus the disutility of price." Moreover, Brady and Robertson (1999) suggest that value is situation-specific where its key determinants are service quality and customer sacrifice. For tourism services, Laws (2000) noted that there has been little evidence of empirical work that pursues the significance of value-based quality through the connection between quality and costs.

In consideration of the gaps in knowledge outlined in this literature review and the relevance of this knowledge to current issues in travel service provision, this paper reports a study that aimed to:

1. Explore customers' WTPM in relation to various travel services, and
2. Identify the relationships between service quality, its dimensions and customers' WTPM.

The study was guided by the general research proposition:

There is a positive relationship between service quality and willingness to pay more.

METHODOLOGY

Sample

The subjects in this study were customers of four different travel agencies in a large city in Australia from July to December 1999. Convenience sampling was employed, with self-administered surveys and reply-paid envelopes distributed personally to customers as they left the travel agencies. A total of 320 surveys were distributed and 122 valid returns were obtained, a response rate of 37.5%. The respondent profile was over half female (58%) with the majority in the age bracket 21 to 30 years (45%). Two-thirds (67%) of the respondents indicated that they were previous users of the particular travel agency.

Scales employed: Service quality

Recent literature suggests that perceptions of performance are the best measure of service quality when predictive power is sought (Dabholkar et al. 2000). Hence, we used a customised SERVQUAL scale in which perceptions of performance on 23 service quality items were obtained. Of the 23 items, 20 were drawn from SERVQUAL and three new items, in a dimension referred to as *output*, were added. These items covered the travel agency's performance on completing agreed tasks, consistence with industry standards, and special customer requirements. Seven point Likert scales were employed. A typical item read *my perception of this travel agency's performance on providing its services at the time it promises to do so is... 1(low) ... to 7 (high)*. In addition to the 23 separate items, a global measure of service quality was obtained on a scale from 1 (very poor) to 10 (excellent).

Scales employed: Customer loyalty

Parasuraman et al.'s (1994) *Reconfigured Behavioral-Intentions Battery*, subsequently refined by its authors (Zeithaml et al., 1996) and also used by de Ruyter et al. (1998), and Bloemer et al. (1999), was adopted and customised for this study. The original scale had 13 items assessing five components: loyalty to company,

external response to problem, propensity to switch, willingness to pay more, and internal response to problem. However, Parasuraman et al. (1994) noted that their scale required refinement, particularly for the latter three of these components. Nevertheless, the *loyalty* component demonstrated excellent internal consistency with an adequate *external response* according to the criteria described by Nunnally (1978).

The *loyalty* dimension was measured chiefly in this study to enable comparisons to the WTPM dimension. However, the dimension measured is termed *preference loyalty*, to avoid confusion with the overall concept of loyalty that also encapsulates willingness to pay more. Preference loyalty was measured on five behavioural items with responses provided on a 7 point scale anchored from 1 (not at all likely) to 7 (extremely likely).

Scales employed: WTPM

The refined WTPM items (see above) from Parasuraman et al.'s (1994) *Reconfigured Behavioral-Intentions Battery* were adopted and customised for this study. This scale required respondents to indicate across six items the likelihood of specified behaviours on a scale anchored from 1 (not at all likely) to 7 (extremely likely). A further scale was developed to assess customers' ability and willingness to pay more for increases in the price of travel services. Responses were elicited through a yes/no format to increases in price corresponding to 1%, 5% and 10%.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The ability and willingness of customers to pay more for travel services

The first aim of this study was to explore customers' WTPM for various travel services. In particular, we sought to establish customers' ability and willingness to pay more for these services. Table 1 provides an overview of customers' general responses and Table 2 provides the mean values for the likelihood that customers would change travel providers or pay more for specified services.

Table 1: Ability and willingness to pay more for travel services.

Increase in price (%)	Respondents able to pay more (%)	Respondents willing to pay more (%)
1	90.8	79.0
5	56.3	34.5
10	29.4	5.0

The data in Table 1 indicate that 91% of respondents were able to pay 1% more for travel services but only 79% indicate that they were willing to do so. As expected, further price increases dramatically decreased respondents' willingness to pay more. This finding portrays customer reluctance to commit to higher prices. Table 2 explores these attitudes further.

Table 2: Likelihood of paying more for specific services.

Item	Mean	SD
1. If this travel agency increased its price overall, would you continue to do business here?	3.7	1.7
2. If this travel agency increased its price overall, would you take your business to a competitor that offers more attractive prices?	5.6	1.3
3. If this travel agency maintained most current prices but charged extra for the services shown below, would you continue to do business here?		
A Travel counselling, itinerary planning and development	4.1	1.6
B Making amendments to travel documents, visas and certifications	4.3	1.4
C Making reservations with airlines, hotels, cruise companies, car rental companies and other special services related to travel (e.g. tickets for entertainment shows)	4.6	1.6
D Other individual client services	4.2	1.6

Note: All values based on a scale of 1 (not at all likely) to 7 (extremely likely).

When all the data in Table 2 is considered, it appears that customers would take a range of actions in response to higher prices or extra charges. Specifically, the value attributed to switching behaviour (the first item in Table 2), falls in the centre of the scale and exhibits a large standard deviation. This points to both switching and non-switching behaviour for different respondents and may indicate some customers' lack of knowledge about relative prices for travel agent services.

The second item in Table 2 gives a clearer message, indicating that customers are price sensitive in a relative sense and so price may be a key driver of customer retention for the travel industry. However, the set of items that are placed third (Item 3, A-D in Table 2) seem to indicate that customers hold a similar view of all extra services (means values range from 4.1-4.6). Although these values fall on the *likely to stay side*, they do not present compelling evidence for loyalty to the travel provider, as some customers may never actually use these services. Issues of loyalty are pursued in more detail in the next section.

The service quality - WTPM relationship in travel services

The second aim of the study was to identify the dimensions of quality that contribute most to customers' willingness to pay more. To commence the analysis, we obtained Pearson correlation coefficients for overall service quality and the dimensions of service quality against preference loyalty and WTPM. The variable for preference loyalty was obtained by averaging the scores on the five items of the loyalty scale of Zeithaml et al. (1996). The variable for WTPM was obtained by averaging the six items for WTPM as shown in Table 2 (with item 2 reverse scored). The results of the correlation analysis are shown in Table 3.

Table 3: Correlation coefficients: service quality against preference loyalty and WTPM.

	Preference loyalty	WTPM
Overall service quality	0.705**	0.201*
Tangibles	0.582**	0.094
Reliability	0.575**	0.124
Responsiveness	0.625**	0.130
Assurance	0.579**	0.124
Empathy	0.580**	0.227*
Output	0.498**	0.228*

* Correlation is significant at $p < .05$ (two tailed).

** Correlation is significant at $p < .01$ (two tailed).

Table 3 indicates a strong positive association between preference loyalty and overall service quality as well as underlying dimensions of service quality. Hence, there is a positive relationship between service quality and preference loyalty in travel services, based on the study sample. This result extends previous findings in the service quality to loyalty literature, in that it establishes the relationship in the travel service industry.

The relationship between service quality and WTPM was not as clear-cut. Table 3 indicates statistical associations between WTPM and overall service quality, empathy, and output at the 95% confidence level. To explore these associations further, we obtained Pearson correlation coefficients for the items comprising WTPM with overall service quality and its underlying dimensions. The results are shown in Table 4.

Following the pattern revealed in Table 3, effects for overall service quality, empathy, and output are evident across some WTPM items, although other effects are also apparent. In particular, Table 4 demonstrates a link between respondents' continuation with the same agency even where it increased prices (provided overall service quality was maintained). Similarly, the service quality dimensions, with the exception of tangibles, were statistically significant with this WTPM item, although the correlation coefficients are relatively low ($R^2 = 0.19-0.30$). This result supports the view that customers are seeking value, where value is a function of both quality and costs (Heskett et al., 1997). As well as price, costs can also include convenience, location, time and effort (Cronin, Brady, Brand, Hightower & Shemwell, 1997). It is possible that some of these factors not captured in this study outweigh increased price, provided that service quality is sufficiently high.

Table 4: Correlation coefficients: service quality against elements of price sensitivity.

	Overall SQ	Tan.	Rel.	Res.	Ass.	Emp.	Output
Increase price overall – continue to do business	0.31**		0.27**	0.20*	0.30**	0.27**	0.19*
Increase price overall – switch to another provider							
Extra charge – travel counselling, itinerary planning	0.19*	0.20*				0.21*	0.26**
Extra charge – amendments							
Extra charge – reservations							
Extra charge – other services							0.18*

Note: Where $p > .05$, coefficients have been omitted.

* Correlation is significant at $p < .05$ (two tailed).

** Correlation is significant at $p < .01$ (two tailed).

In relation to Table 4, it is also noteworthy that respondents indicated an association between preparedness to pay more for travel counselling and itinerary planning, with overall service quality, tangibles, empathy, and output. This seems logical as there is greater complexity, tailoring, privacy and comfort needs associated with these services in comparison to straightforward and relatively more routine travel reservations or amendments. In summary, respondents are suggesting that they will pay more for service quality in general and for service activities that require significant customisation. In the latter case, these types of services will be influenced to a large extent by the service consultant.

Having established a link between service quality and WTPM, we were interested in determining the relative predictive power of the dimensions of quality. We therefore performed a regression analysis with the item *continue to do business at increased price* (item 1, Table 4), as the dependent variable against the dimensions of quality. The R^2 showed that 19.4% of the variance was explained with three significant predictors ($F [6, 110] = 4.412, p < .001$). The significant predictors (tangibles, reliability, and assurance) and corresponding t values are shown in Table 5.

Table 5: Standardised regression coefficients (d.v.: continue to do business at increased price).

	Beta	t value	Sig
Constant		.654	.514
Tangibles	-.38	-3.04	.003
Reliability	.40	2.70	.008
Assurance	.33	2.50	.014

The results from the regression analysis confirm that service quality contributes to the variance in customers' willingness to pay more. In particular, the effects were greatest for reliability, assurance and tangibles, with the latter exhibiting a negative result. Given the correlation coefficients between the WTPM item and the service quality dimensions shown in Table 4, finding effects for reliability and assurance were expected; it was surprising, however, that empathy was not a predictor (and so not listed in Table 5). Considering that assurance and empathy are related constructs and therefore may share variance, this result is not inexplicable.

The most intriguing result from the regression is that of tangibles. As a single factor, tangibles does not appear to be associated with respondents intentions to *continue to do business at an increased price*. However, the regression demonstrated a significant negative relationship. It is postulated here that customers' unwillingness to pay more is related to a perception of inappropriate expenditure on the tangible features of the service (e.g., office decorations). As the nature and role of tangibles has been inconsistent in other service quality studies (Headley and Miller, 1993; O'Connor, Shewchuk & Carney, 1994; Parasuraman, Berry & Zeithaml, 1991), its particular influence and implications in relation to travel customers' WTPM is raised here as an interesting area for future research.

Managerial implications

In response to the suggestion of increasing travel service prices, a greater number of customers indicated that they were *able* to pay more in comparison to those *willing* to pay more. Customers' unwillingness to commit to higher prices was further exemplified through a propensity to switch to competitors with lower prices where the same service-level was offered. For specific services, customers indicated that they would continue with the travel agent where prices were increased for customised and personalised services such as travel counselling and itinerary planning.

These results indicate that travel agents would benefit from operating a dual strategy analogous to that outlined earlier (Buhalis, 1998). Travel agents can continue to offer standard services where price is the primary mode of competition. The same travel agents can provide more complex *value added* services without losing the price conscious regular customers. This requires a differentiated price strategy based on the type, customisation, and complexity of the service. To charge more for these non-routine services, the study results direct travel agents to compete on the tangibles, empathy and output aspects of service quality.

The primary mode of competition for general price increases in travel services appears to be the service quality dimensions of reliability and assurance. These dimensions combine the efficiency of the service delivery with professional attributes of the service consultant, resulting in caring and individual attention to customer's specific needs. The dimension, tangibles, demonstrated a negative relationship with the likelihood that customers would continue to do business in the agency at an increased price. Tangibles describe the appearance of the agency premises, its employees, and the physical facilities. It is proposed here that travel customers want a fair price in relation to the personalised aspects of service but are unwilling to accept price rises where agencies' overall profitability is *promoted* through the physical attributes captured in the tangibles dimension.

Future research

This research has endeavoured to develop and explore price sensitivity and, in particular, WTPM in travel services provision. We suggest that the scale for WTPM needs to be extended and refined. For example, our item relating to switching behaviour and *extra charge – other services* needs to provide information about the nature of those services so that consumers can respond more definitively.

Various findings in this study invite further investigation. Firstly, exploring the role and importance of tangibles in travel agent services is necessary to determine whether our conclusions are well founded. Secondly, there are a number of issues about the value of specific services that arise. In particular, it would be useful to know the relative importance of quality in relation to other factors such as cost, location, time, and effort in the purchase of travel services. Finally, we have not considered the role of the service consultant separately from the *travel agency*. It is quite conceivable that the service quality provided by a favourite consultant forms the foundations of loyalty, which leads to the question of whether loyalty is to the service consultant rather than to the travel agency.

CONCLUSION

This paper has reported on a study that explored customers' assessments of the service quality provided by four travel agencies in Australia, and their willingness to pay more for those services. Key findings are that, firstly, while many consumers are able to pay more for travel services, fewer are willing to do so. Secondly, correlation coefficients indicate that WTPM (an aggregated score) is positively associated with overall service quality (a global measure), and with the service quality dimensions of empathy and output. Extending the analysis to explore the correlation coefficients for the elements of WTPM with the dimensions of service quality indicated that customers' WTPM is linked to more complex services that require considerable customisation. Finally, a regression analysis suggested that reliability and assurance are the best positive predictors of customers' likelihood of continuing to do business in the context of rising prices, with tangibles emerging as a significant negative predictor.

These findings support and extend previous studies in that service quality demonstrates a relationship to the price sensitivity aspect of behavioural intentions. However, the results reveal the complexities inherent in travel service provision, where some services can be standardised while others require individual attention. Consequently, although the findings do provide practical implications for the travel industry in relation to a differentiated price and service strategy, they also highlight further requirements for research into travel services.

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