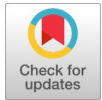


Communication Skills of the Service Provider as the Principal Determinant of Customer Satisfaction: A Case of Doctors' Service

Indrani Majumder



Abstract: *Communication style is intensely influential on customers' purchase probability, trust, satisfaction, perceived service quality, and perceptions of brand affection, competence, and attachment. Social interaction models suggest that when consumers engage in service interactions, they rely heavily on the communication style of the service personnel to form their evaluations, often lacking knowledge of service issues. Frontline service personnel represent the image of the organisation. The perception of customers towards the organisation is influenced by their experiences at the front line. A poor service delivery experience by a customer can negatively impact the organisation's image, as the customer may share their negative encounters with others. Therefore, the organisation must ensure the quality of frontline services to maintain a positive image. The study suggests that employers should provide training to staff to improve their communication skills and foster favourable attitudes.*

Keywords: *Customer Satisfaction, Perceived Service Quality, Communication Skills, Favourable Attitudes.*

I. INTRODUCTION

Customer satisfaction is often linked to both goods and services. Customer satisfaction is a measure that determines the level of happiness customers have with a company's products, and the capabilities of the organisation are also evident in this judgment of customer satisfaction. It is a highly personal assessment by the individual customer based on their expectations. It is an emotional reaction to the disparity between what customers expect from the organisation and what they receive. It is an overall customer attitude towards an organization. It's a well-known fact that no business can exist without customers. Customer satisfaction is essential to the survival and excellence of any business organisation. In the case of service marketing, customer satisfaction occurs when the service meets or exceeds the customer's expectations. A customer may be satisfied with the service, the service provider, the environmental aspects of the service station, or the product that aids in the provision of service. In this context, it is worth noting that corporate and individual customers may have widely differing reasons for purchasing a product or service; therefore, any measure of satisfaction will need to account for

these differences. Today, customers are not only interested in the product they are being offered, but also in all the additional elements of service that they receive, from the greeting they receive when they enter a service centre. More and more companies are striving not just for customer satisfaction, but also for customer delight - that extra bit of added value that can lead to increased customer loyalty.

II. EXTENDED MARKETING-MIX IN SERVICE MARKETING

About the service industry, customer satisfaction is directly or indirectly related to the "seven P's" viz. product, price, place, promotion, people, physical evidence, and process. In service marketing, the product refers to the intangible service offered to customers. Quality service and timely delivery lead to customer satisfaction, which is crucial for any service industry. Price is another critical component in service marketing, as customers often associate the price of a product or service with its quality. Thirdly, services cannot be typically stored or transferred like goods because of their intangible nature and inseparability characteristic from the service providers. Hence, the distribution channel or Place of delivering a particular service differs from the distribution channel used in the marketing of goods. Promotion of services is quite different from the promotion of goods. In service, customers would prefer more personal information and better communication with the service providers. Communication is, therefore, a vital aspect that leads to customer satisfaction. Effective communication is crucial in the service industry. In 1987, Judd added People as the fifth element in service marketing. Appropriate staff are the essential ingredient to successful service provision. Employees of a service organisation or any professional service provider serve as the primary point of contact with customers. They play a vital role in the marketing of services and in satisfying their customers. A good service provider not only provides customer satisfaction but also fosters customer loyalty and retention. Many factors affect customer satisfaction, which is directly related to the people in the service industry. These factors include friendly, courteous, knowledgeable, and helpful employees, as well as the accuracy, timeliness, clarity, and promptness of billing, and the provision of quick service (Hokanson, 1995).

Recruiting the right staff and training them appropriately in the delivery of their services is essential if the organisation wants to obtain a competitive advantage.

Physical evidence, i.e., the physical environment, facilities, and atmosphere, is an essential ingredient of the service mix. Consumers typically form perceptions based on their impressions of the service

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*Correspondence Author(s)

Dr. Indrani Majumder*, Assistant Professor, Department of Economics, Kanchrapara College, Kanchrapara, North 24 Pgs West Bengal, India.
E-mail: indrani.m09@gmail.com, ORCID ID: <https://orcid.org/0009-0002-2754-2793>

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provision. This element can make the service tangible. In this context, communication can also be used to make the service tangible by word of mouth, offering creative advice, or providing other service guarantees. Process refers to the systems used to support the organisation in delivering its service. All Processes are concerned with the consistent creation and delivery of Customer Value. Processes must be continuously reviewed and coordinated to improve the customer experience, customer satisfaction, and demonstrate customer consideration. Here, activities such as listening, questioning, understanding, and responding to what is being communicated by both present and potential customers can lead to both customer satisfaction and retention. A service provider must always pay attention to what they are communicating to their customers. To avail of any kind of service, both the service provider and the customer must be present, and with that, a communication procedure exists between them. Not only is the service provider crucial, but communication skills are also crucial for the customers. When a customer cannot communicate effectively with the service provider, the service provider can't deliver the best service to the customer. So, communication is not a one-way process; rather, it is a two-way process where the service provider and the customer play similar roles.

III. REVIEW OF LITERATURE

Many studies suggest that there is a fundamental difference between goods and services, namely, it is the way they are produced and consumed (Grönroos, 1990, [1]); (Grönroos, 1998, [2]); (Edvardsson, 1997, [3]), (Bateson and Hoffman, 1999, [4]). The period between service production and consumption is considerably shorter than for goods. Most of the services are produced “*on the spot*” in an interactive process, where customers and service providers meet. Satisfaction with service quality depends on a large number of dimensions - both tangible and intangible attributes of the product-service offer. The impact of intangible dimensions on consumer satisfaction is of particular interest at this point. Many psychological studies even show that non-verbal behavior by the service provider significantly affects service evaluation (Gabbott Mark, 2000, [5]). For example, the quality of interaction between the customer and the service provider influences customers' perception of service quality. In services, a single employee may affect service efficiency and consequent customer satisfaction with the service (Barnard, 2002, [6]). Even customers' involvement and participation in the service delivery affect customer satisfaction (Kelly, Skinner et al., 1982, [7]). Due to the differences in production and provision of products and services, customers evaluate quality and attributes of material goods and services in different ways (Mathe and Shapiro, 1993, [8]).

According to Grönroos (1982, [9]), the quality of a service perceived by customers differs depending on what strategy the company chooses to deliver and promote that service. The service quality model by Grönroos posits that the quality of a service, as perceived by the customer, can be divided into two dimensions: technical quality and functional quality. The former denotes what the customer receives as the output of a service production process, and the latter refers to how the technical quality is produced and transferred to the customer

during buyer-seller interactions. Grönroos posits that the technical quality is the “basic condition for a positively perceived total quality, but the functional quality is the one that adds competitive edge” (Gummesson, 1987, [10]). Furthermore, in the relationship marketing, the growth of the importance of functional quality in comparison to technical quality becomes a strategic one (Grönroos 1993, [11]). In service marketing, it is crucial to understand customers' expectations. In the words of Parasuraman et al. (1985, [12]; 1988, [13]) service quality is determined by the differences between customers' expectation of service provider's performance and their evaluation of the services they received. Supporting the view of Louis & Booms, Parasuraman, Zeithaml & Berry, “the only criteria that count in evaluating service quality are those defined by the customers”. In this context, they defined 10 criteria that customers use to judge the quality of the service. These 10 criteria are Reliability, Access, Security, Credibility, Understanding the customers, Responsiveness, Competence, Courtesy, Tangibles, and Communication. Communication with the other determinants plays a vital role in determining the service quality for any service, in this regard. Here, communication refers to the service provider's ability to communicate effectively with customers. Proper communication skills help lead to an effective quality service, where the expected service of the customers and the perceived service delivered by the service providers may be more or less the same. This efficient process may prevent the emergence of different service quality gaps and lead to better customer satisfaction.

A distinction is also made between perceived and expected service quality, suggesting that the quality is perceived subjectively. Grönroos (1988, [14]) further explored that in the case of a company, which extends goods with services, it is more appropriate to talk about total perceived quality. According to him, a high perceived quality is achieved when the experienced quality aligns with customer expectations, i.e., the expected quality. However, if the expectations are unrealistic, the total perceived quality will be low, even if high quality was experienced (Grönroos 1988, [14]). The expected quality is heavily influenced by market communication (advertising, sales campaigns, PR and direct mail), word-of-mouth, company image, and customers' needs. While a company directly controls market communication, the word-of-mouth and company image are outside its immediate reach. Grönroos concluded that the total perceived quality is not only defined by the level of technical and functional dimensions, but also by the gap between the expected and the experienced quality.

Thus, according to the study by Grönroos, it can be stated that communication and customer satisfaction have a significant impact on determining service quality across all types of services.

Many researchers have looked into the importance of customer satisfaction. Customers are the purpose of what we do, and rather than relying on them, we depend heavily on them. The customer is not the source of a problem, we shouldn't perhaps make a wish that customers should go away, because our future and our security will be put in jeopardy”. That is the primary reason why organisations today focus on customer satisfaction,

loyalty, and retention (Zairi, 2000, [15]).

A person's feelings of pleasure or disappointment resulting from comparing a product to its perceived performance (or outcome) about his or her expectations (Kotler, 2000, [16]). Satisfaction can be associated with feelings of acceptance, happiness, relief, excitement, and delight (Hoyer and MacInnis, 2001, [17]).

Customer satisfaction does have a positive effect on an organization's profitability. Satisfied customers form the foundation of any successful business as customer satisfaction leads to repeat purchase, brand loyalty, and positive word of mouth (Hoyer and MacInnis, 2001, [17]).

IV. OBJECTIVES OF THE STUDY

Service, especially professional service, is primarily based on direct interaction between service providers and customers. It requires the physical presence of both the provider and the customer at the point of service delivery. Communication plays a vital role in satisfying customers in this situation. Professional services require a two-way communication process—one from the service provider and another from the customer. Effective communication leads to improved service delivery, complete customer satisfaction, and enhanced customer retention. Adequate communication skills on the part of the service provider can minimise the chances of losing customers if other circumstances or conditions do not meet the customer's expectations. In this backdrop, the study has tried to emphasize the following issues:

- I. To demonstrate the impact of the communication skills of the professional service provider (i.e. doctor) on the customer (i.e. patient) satisfaction.
- To observe the importance of service quality in customer satisfaction & customer retention in the case of professional service.

V. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

The objective of this research study is to find out the importance of the communication skills of the service providers in customer satisfaction. To initiate the project work, the chosen category of service provider is the doctors. Their communication skills can be evaluated by several distinct factors, including their communication ability, professionalism, responsiveness, punctuality, discipline, and other key aspects, which have become the driving force behind measuring customer satisfaction through effective communication. To gain a deeper understanding of the impact of the exploratory design course on communication skills, a suitable design approach was selected. [Table 1](#) depicts the sources of data for the study.

Table 1: Sources of data (patients of the doctors)

Age Group	Gender	Qualification	Occupation	Annual income (INR)
21-30	Male	Madhyamik	Govt.	<60000
31-50	Female	Graduate	Employee	60001 to
>50		Post-graduate	Non-govt.	12000

Enlightenment: The above tabular demonstration shows that 68% of total respondents visit doctors when needed, and 20% of respondents visit their doctors once every half year. It depicts a scenario where the majority of respondents are not regular visitors to doctors, with only 1% and 2% visiting once a year and once a month, respectively.

			Employee	120001 to
			Businessman	240000
			Student	240001 to
			Retired	400000
			Housewife	>400000

Data collection was conducted using a structured questionnaire that contained closed-ended questions to gauge customer satisfaction with the communication skills of professional service providers. Some scaling techniques have been adopted, such as the Likert scale, 5-point scale, semantic differential scale, and rank order scale, to convert qualitative behavioural phenomena into a quantitative format. A convenience sampling technique was used to select the places. As the study aimed to measure customer satisfaction with the communication skills of the doctors, the sample was selected from diverse age categories, both genders, with varied educational backgrounds, occupational statuses, and different income levels.

VI. FINDINGS & ANALYSIS

Table 2: Demographic Scenario of the Respondents

Age	No. of respondents	Gender	No. of respondents
21-30	52	Male	80
31-50	24	Female	20
>50	24		
Total	100	Total	100

Educational Qualification	No. of respondents
Madhyamik	4
Graduate	64
Post-Graduate	32
Total	100

Table 3: Socio-Economic Status of the Respondents

Annual income	No. of respondents	Occupation	No. of respondents
<60000	36	Govt. Employee	8
60001-120000	16	Non-Govt. Employee	32
120001-240000	36	Business man	12
240001-400000	4	Student	20
>400000	8	Retired	16
		Housewife	12
TOTAL	100	TOTAL	100

Table 4: Frequency of visits to the doctor

Frequency of visits to the doctor	No. of respondents	Percentage (%) of visits
Once a month	8	8%
Once every half year	20	21%
Once a year	4	4%
When needed	68	68%
Total	100	100%

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Table 5: Customer Satisfaction Concerning the Doctors' Chamber

Criteria regarding the doctor's chamber	Very satisfied	Quite satisfied	Neutral	Quite dissatisfied	Very dissatisfied	Total
The environmental aspect of the doctors' chamber	32	24	44	-	-	100
Enrichment of required equipment	36	48	16	-	-	100
Level of satisfaction	48	52	-	-	-	100

Enlightenment: The above representation indicates that the majority of the total respondents, namely 44%, are neutral in their opinion about the Environmental aspect of the doctor's chamber. While 48% of the respondents are pretty satisfied with the Enrichment of the required equipment, and 52% of the total respondents are **neither satisfied nor dissatisfied (neutral)** in their overall Degree of satisfaction with the doctors.

Table 6: Satisfaction Concerning the Ease of Contacting the Doctor

Ease of contacting the doctor	No. of respondents	Percentage (%)
Very easy	16	16%
Quite easy	56	56%
Neither easy nor difficult	24	24%
Quite difficult	4	4%
Very difficult	-	-
Total	100	100%

Enlightenment: *The above representation shows that it is pretty easy to contact doctors in the event of any situation arising, as the majority, i.e., 56% of the total respondents, have expressed their opinion on this statement.* This concludes that it is pretty easy to communicate with the doctors.

Table 7: Satisfaction of the respondents who were admitted to any hospital/nursing home

Criteria	Fully satisfied	Quite satisfied	Neutral	Quite dissatisfied	Fully dissatisfied	Total
Satisfaction with the environment & staff assistance	12	28	8	0	0	48
Degree of satisfaction with the doctor at that place	28	20	0	0	0	48

Enlightenment: *The above illustration depicts the respondents' positive opinions regarding their hospital admissions, specifically their satisfaction with the environment, staff assistance, and the degree of satisfaction with the doctor at the hospital.* The majority of respondents report being quite satisfied with the factors mentioned above.

Table 8: Satisfaction Level Concerning the Doctor's Service

Criteria	Fully dissatisfied	Quite dissatisfied	Neither satisfied nor dissatisfied	Quite satisfied	Fully satisfied	Total
Satisfaction with the time	-	4	8	56	32	100
Satisfaction with the clarity of advice	-	0	0	40	60	100
Satisfaction with the enquiries over the phone	-	16	32	40	12	100
Satisfaction with the problem-solving way	-	0	4	68	28	100

Enlightenment: The table above indicates that a majority (56%) of the total respondents are pretty satisfied with the doctors regarding the time taken to respond to their problems. The following criterion is the clarity of advice given by the doctors, where the majority (60%) states that they are delighted with the advice given by the doctors. The third and fourth criteria concern the telephone enquiries handled by the doctors and how problems were resolved by them, respectively. The majority of respondents, i.e., 40% and 68%, are quite satisfied with both statements, respectively.

Table 9: Average Response Scenario for the doctor's service

Average Response Scenario for the asked question	Total	Average
Satisfaction with the time	31	1.24
Satisfaction with the clarity of advice	35	1.4
Satisfaction with the enquiries over the phone	12	0.48
Satisfaction with the problem-solving way	31	1.24

Table 9 presents an average scenario regarding the respondents' satisfaction levels with the aforementioned criteria of the doctors' service.

Table 10: Probability of Visits to the Same Doctors

Parameters	No. of respondents
Definitely yes	72
Probably yes	20
Not sure	8
Probably not	-
Not	-
Total	100

Enlightenment: Table 10 indicates that the majority of respondents (72%) stated they would go to the same doctors if the situation arose. They are not willing to visit any other doctor for future check-ups.

Table 11: The Frequency of the Respondents' Recommendation of the Name of the Doctors to Others

Frequency of recommendation of the efficient doctor's name to others	No. of respondents
Always	52
Sometimes	48
Never	-
Total	25

Enlightenment: The table above concludes the frequency of recommendations for doctors' services. The frequency shows that a greater part (52%) of the total respondents will always recommend the names of the doctors with whom they are satisfied to others.

Table 12: The Environmental Drawbacks for the Efficiency of the Doctors:

Parameters	No of respondents
Strongly agree	20
Agree	60
Neutral	16
Disagree	4
Strongly disagree	-
Total	100

Enlightenment: The above diagram indicates that a greater part (60%) of the respondents are in favour of considering the environmental drawbacks (if any) for the efficient service of doctors.

Table 13: Non-Recommendation About the Inefficient Service by The Doctors

Frequency	No. Of respondents
Always	6
Sometimes	5
Never	4
No response	10
Total	25

Enlightenment: The above table shows that the majority of the respondents have not given their opinion on non-recommendation about the doctor's service to others. They believe that the service provided by doctors may vary from person to person. However, it is also observable that 24% of the respondents stated that they always oppose the doctors with whom they are not satisfied at all.

Table 14: Satisfaction with the Attributes of Doctor's Service

Characteristics	Average (no. of respondents=100)
Professional	2.04
Enthusiastic	1.72
Communicative	2.2
Courteous	1.92
Patience	1.84
Responsive	2.12
Listen carefully	1.96
Sincerity	1.88
Total	15.68

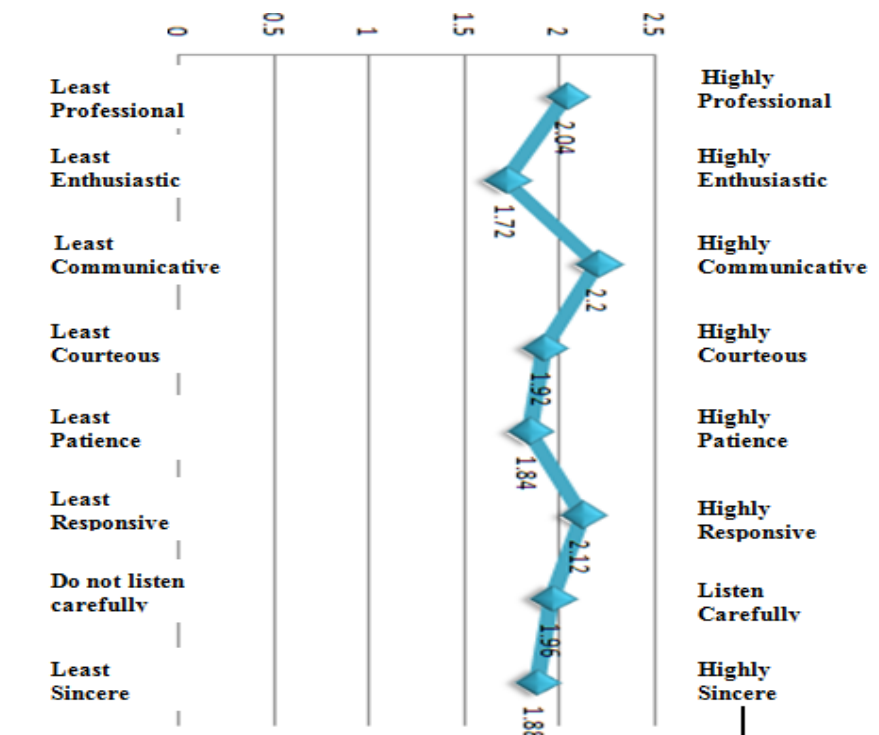


Figure 1: Outcome in Semantic Differential Scale

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Enlightenment: The results suggest that the communication skills of professional service providers have a significant impact on customer satisfaction. However, it is also crucial to maintain the other determinants alongside it.

VII. CONCLUSION

The 5-point scaling indicates that the respondents have found it easy to contact the doctors. They are also satisfied with the service of the doctors. The degree of satisfaction is proven to be high when they agree to consider the environmental drawbacks to provide efficient service to doctors. Here, it is worth noting that customers are very conscious of the communication skills and service delivery systems of providers, and they are not prepared to compromise their satisfaction level due to any type of inefficiency in the service provider's service. The respondents are willing to recommend others about the services of doctors and lawyers through word-of-mouth communication, whether they are satisfied or not. This leads to a negative image for the respective service providers if the respondents circulate any negative word-of-mouth information among others. This study also highlights the impact of communication skills on the respondents' satisfaction levels. The semantic differential scale also suggests some characteristic opinions about the above-mentioned service providers. These characteristics helped to draw a clear conclusion about the service delivery system for the doctors. If the parameters are positive, it can be said that the service provider excels in their service delivery practice, and the respondents are satisfied with them. Consequently, it can be noted that the parameters mentioned above directly or indirectly facilitate the determination of the communication skills of service providers and also assist in satisfying customers to a great extent. In summary, we can conclude that the communication skills of doctors play a significant role in determining customer satisfaction. The communication skills of the aforementioned service provider are crucial because the service provider and the customer come into direct contact during the service delivery process. So the service provider should always maintain good, effective, and understandable communication (two-way) with the customers to derive enhanced customer satisfaction.

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Authors Contributions	I am the sole author of the article.

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AUTHORS PROFILE



Dr. Indrani Majumder is an Assistant Professor in Economics at Kanchrapara College, in the district of North 24 PGS in the state of West Bengal in India. She is an MA (Economics) and an MBA. She had been awarded a Ph.D. in 2012 in the field of Rural Marketing Management. Dr. Majumder has over 21 years of teaching experience in the fields of Economics and Marketing Management at various degree colleges and

two Universities in the State of West Bengal, India. Her research works include Consumer Behaviour, Service Marketing, and brand management, among others. She had written more than 14 research articles in different national and international journals. She had also authored chapters in some edited books. She had published one edited volume as the editor.

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