

Consumer Perceptions and Expectations of Garden Center Product and Service Quality

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One strategy that could potentially help any business achieve a competitive advantage is to deliver high quality customer service. Whitely reported that customers are five times more likely to switch vendors due to perceived service problems than for price or product quality concerns (5). Henkoff suggested that the key to delivering excellent quality

service begins by finding, training, and keeping the best service workers (1). He reported that companies often call on employees to perform monotonous, rigidly scripted tasks, all the while asking them to smile brightly and tell customers to have a nice day. Clearly, employees are a key link in the chain between business image and customer perceptions.

As traditional garden centers (TGC) and non-traditional garden center outlets (NTO) sell more similar kinds of products, consumers' ability to differentiate one outlet from another will increasingly come from the quality of services offered. Assessing retail service quality can be helpful in identifying a competitive edge and the development of a marketing strategy. If a retailer could determine what customers valued in the services they receive, that retailer could discover weaknesses that need to be improved and strengths on which they could capitalize.

One method for assessing service quality is SERVQUAL, which was developed by Zeithaml, Parasuraman, and Berry (6). SERVQUAL is a questionnaire which consists of 22 pairs of questions, half of which measure expectations and half of which measure perceptions of service quality. Questions are asked using a five-point Likert scale where 1 = "strongly disagree" and 5 = "strongly agree." Expectations are what consumers would expect from an ideal retailer. Perceptions are what consumers felt they got from shopping in one specific retail outlet.

SERVQUAL divides all aspects of service quality into five dimensions: tangibles, reliability, responsiveness, assurance, and empathy. The level of service quality is defined as the difference between customer perceptions and expectations. A negative service quality gap meant the retailer was not meeting customer expectations.

Negative gaps indicate weak areas of service quality that need to be improved. A positive service quality gap meant the retailer exceeded customers' expectations. Positive gaps are strengths on which the retailer could capitalize. Our objective was to adapt SERVQUAL to define consumers' service quality perceptions and expectations of traditional and non-traditional retail garden centers.

Materials and Methods

Waldrop reported that good test markets typify the U.S. population and are reasonable locations for consumer behavior investigations (11). The top three U.S. test markets having demographics most closely matching the U.S. average were: Detroit, Michigan; St. Louis, Missouri-Illinois; and Charlotte-Gastonia-Rock Hill, North Carolina-South Carolina (8). Since Charlotte was the closest of these three test markets to Auburn (450 miles), it was selected.

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Original SERVQUAL questions were reworded to reflect services found in garden centers. We asked consumers to allocate 100 points among the five dimensions of service quality based on the dimensions' relative importance to them. Surveys were distributed on March 31 and April 1, 28, and 29, 1995. Shoppers in three NTO's and five TGC's were approached by a university student and offered a survey form with a business-reply envelope. Each participant was told about the survey and how it could be completed at home, informed of consent to participate, and shown the business-reply, postage-free envelope provided for ease of mailing. A total of 2,164 surveys was distributed among seven outlets in the second weekend, with 606 distributed in TGCs and 1,558 given in NTOs.

Results and Discussion

TGC customers returned 242 of the 1124 distributed surveys (21.5% response rate). Only 13.6% of the NTO customers responded as 342 of 2505 distributed surveys were returned.

Customers of both kinds of retail outlets were similar in age (48 years), years of education (15.5 years), number of household members (2-3 people), gender distribution (73% female), and marital status. However, TGC customers had a 5% higher household

income (\$45,686) when compared to NTO customers (\$43,504). They were very similar demographically.

Of the five service quality dimensions, both TGC and NTO customers ranked assurance (ability to convey trust and confidence) and responsiveness (meeting needs in a timely manner) as most important and the tangibles (physical appearance of equipment, personnel, and printed materials) as least important (Table 1.) TGC customers valued empathy (caring, individualized attention) more than NTO customers did. Clearly, what employees say and do to convey confidence and trust are critical in delivering high quality service in the garden center.

NTO and TGC customers had similar expectations of their respective retailers but consistently lower perceptions of assurance (Table 2). This service quality gap was nearly three times as large for NTO customers compared to TGC customers, suggesting that TGCs were better at meeting customer expectations and have a potential strength or advantage in this service quality dimension. Niemiera et al. reported that technical knowledge, or assurance in the SERVQUAL survey, was an important service the garden center should provide (6).

NTO customers had a higher expectation for retailer responsiveness when compared to TGC customers; yet, TGC customers had a higher perception score (Table 2). The

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responsiveness gap was more than twice as large for NTOs as the gap calculated for TGCs. This meant that customers of TGC felt their retailer was responding to their needs better than NTO customers.

A higher perception score was calculated for TGC customers compared to NTO customers, and an empathy gap was identified for both. The TGC customer had only 1/4 the gap calculated for the NTO customer. NTO and TGC customers had similar expectations on the empathy items but had lower perceptions except for convenient operating hours. Empathy, or caring and individualized attention, was more important to NTO customers than TGC, yet TGC were providing more empathy in their customers' eyes.

TGC and NTO customers had similar expectations for retailer reliability, yet TGC customers had a higher perception score. Customers perceived a reliability gap, but the gap for TGCs was one-third less. NTO customers had similar or higher expectations for all questions except showing an interest in solving problems, yet they consistently had lower perceptions on all reliability questions. Here again, NTO customers expected more of their retailer, but felt they got less reliability.

NTO customers had higher expectations of the tangible aspects of service quality when compared to TGC customers (Table 2). Tangibles was the only dimension

where expectations were met by either retail outlet. This was the only dimension for which NTO customers had higher perceptions than TGC customers.

It was surprising (to us) that customers of NTO had very similar expectations of their retailer on many aspects of service quality. Perhaps they are expecting too much, but the result remains that both groups have similar expectations. However, TGC were doing a better job at meeting expectations, yet they still have room to improve. For the TGC, this study should be a call to analyze what is working to provide high quality services in their own business and what isn't.

If TGCs want to narrow the greatest advantage NTOs have, they should focus on improving the quality of equipment and printed materials, and making operating hours more convenient. The tangibles dimension is the NTO's greatest advantage. They should strive to maintain their competitive advantage for assurance and empathy.


NTOs need to improve their customers' perception of assurance and empathy. These are both employee-related dimensions. The ability to convey trust in what you know and confidence that you know the answers is fundamental to provide assurance. Empathy, care and concern, are also important. While product and service differentiation are important, employees should be the primary focus for non-traditional garden centers.

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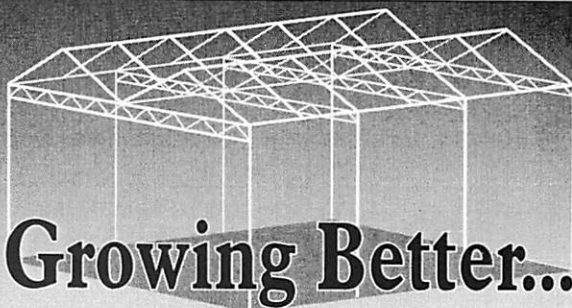

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This research demonstrated that customers of NTOs and TGCs have very similar expectations of service quality from their respective retailers. However, TGCs clearly better met customer expectations. Both types of retail outlets had significant service quality gaps. Narrowing service quality gaps by focusing first on the largest gaps can be a substantial component of a marketing strategy to improve competitiveness for every garden center.


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