

EXCEEDING CUSTOMER EXPECTATIONS IN THE SERVICE BUSINESS

Pitchaya Tiyarattanachai¹ and Tanaporn Phurinan²

^{1,2}Faculty of Liberal Arts, Panyapiwat Institute of Management

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Abstract

In today's fiercely competitive service business, companies must prioritize customer satisfaction to be successful, as satisfied customers are more likely to become loyal, recommend the business to others, and contribute to positive word-of-mouth, which ultimately enhances the company's reputation and market position. Research reveals that retaining existing customers is five times more cost-effective than acquiring new ones. To stand out, businesses in the service industry should consistently exceed customer expectations. By addressing diverse customer needs and customizing offerings, they meet 'Normative 'should' expectations', ensuring positive interactions. This study dives into the realm of customer and service expectations within service-oriented industries. It comprehensively explores the variables shaping service quality, aiming to identify crucial factors influencing service quality in these sectors. This research aims to provide actionable insights for service businesses, suggesting useful strategies to surpass customer expectations. By understanding and surpassing these expectations as well as embracing future trends with technology, data-driven insights, and personalized experiences, companies can guarantee exceptional service quality. This approach fosters enduring customer satisfaction and loyalty in the long run.

Keywords: Customer Expectation, Customer Service, Exceeding Expectation, Service Business

Introduction

Customer service is a term that comes across often while purchasing a product or even while promoting a product. Generally, Customer service, in its essence, involves assisting and supporting customers before, during, and after their purchase of a product or service (Iwuozor, 2023). It embodies the way a business serves its customers, thereby indirectly reflecting the brand's values. Great customer service will result in maximum customer retention. Growing the existing customer base is as important as retaining the customers. A brand with outstanding customer service not only ensures customer retention but also distinguishes the company from its competitors. By valuing relationships with both new and existing customers, businesses demonstrate their commitment. This commitment involves dedication to providing consistent, high-quality products or services, addressing customer needs promptly, offering excellent customer support, and going above and beyond to ensure satisfaction. In today's business landscape, leveraging technology for customer support is common. Conversational AI agents like ChatGPT, powered by AI, facilitate natural language interactions with users. They address common inquiries, resolve issues, and enhance the overall customer experience, freeing up human agents to focus on more complex tasks (Adam et al., 2020; Khan, 2024). Such commitment, as highlighted by Grant (2010), ultimately paves the way for success.

As customer service and business success are interlinked, businesses are now focusing more on delivering excellent service to their customers, such as The Ritz-Carlton Hotel Company turning customer errors into service opportunities. For example, one guest forgot laptop charger at the hotel. The company delivered exceptional service by sending him his laptop charger the next day. By anticipating customer's need for his laptop charger, the company demonstrated exceptional service, leading to customer satisfaction (Qualtrics, 2022).

Ensuring continuous attention to customer satisfaction is outstanding for organizational success, with a key driver being exceptional customer service. The Zendesk Customer Experience Trends Report 2023 (CX Trends 2023, n.d.) reveals that 73% of consumers consider switching to a competitor after encountering negative experiences (Wintermantel, 2021). This highlights the vital role of customer service in influencing satisfaction. Positive experiences and high-quality service elevate satisfaction, enhancing loyalty and reducing the likelihood of customers exploring alternatives.

The study's findings, including those by Ibojo (2015), reinforce the significant contribution of overall customer satisfaction to customer retention. Similarly, research conducted by Smith et al. (2017) and Johnson and Karley (2018) further supports this correlation. This correlation underscores the recognition that the long-term success of any

organization depends on prioritizing customer satisfaction and retention. Companies that prioritize exceptional customer service are well-positioned to achieve heightened profitability, build enduring brand loyalty, and increase customer advocacy, as emphasized by Forbes Business Council (2023).

It is crucial to note that failing to meet or exceed customer expectations can result in a lower customer satisfaction score, and dissatisfied customers are unlikely to remain loyal. To deliver an exceptional customer experience, brands must consistently surpass expectations and strategically explore various ideas to go above and beyond customer expectations, ensuring that customer satisfaction remains high and contributes to long-term customer retention.

Service Expectation

Customers evaluate the features and potential risks associated with a service, shaping their expectations regarding its performance. The strength of these expectations is particularly pronounced when they pertain to attributes deemed significant in the decision-making process. These expectations take shape during the search and decision-making phases, influenced significantly by information searches and evaluations of available alternatives (Lovelock et al., 2012).

Customer's satisfaction and delight are both strongly influenced by service

expectations. Zeithaml et al. (1993) identified customers' service expectations, which encompass desired, adequate, and anticipated service levels, with a tolerance zone positioned between the desired and adequate service thresholds.



Figure 1 Components of customer expectations (Zeithaml et al., 1993)

According to Figure 1, 'Desired Service' reflects the envisioned level of service customers aspire to receive—A combination of perceived possibilities and expectations based on personal needs. 'Adequate Service' denotes the minimum acceptable level. 'The Zone of Tolerance', situated between these two, represents the range of service performance deemed satisfactory by customers. In the broader context, when behavioral researchers refer to 'Expectations', they encompass a spectrum of potential outcomes, reflecting what might, could, should, or had better not happen.

Expanding on this framework, the hierarchical model introduced by Wilson et al. (2008) as depicted in Figure 2, offers a more nuanced perspective.

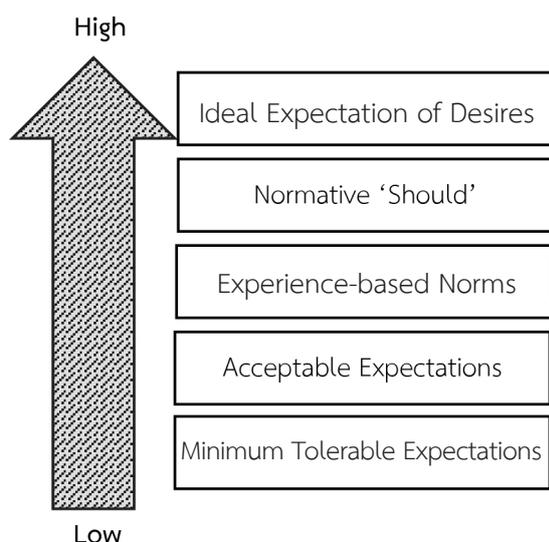


Figure 2 Hierarchical model of expectations
(Wilson et al., 2008)

According to Figure 2, ‘Ideal Expectations or Desires’ embody the envisioned level of expectation aligning with personal aspirations for a particular experience. ‘Normative ‘should’ Expectations’ stem from standards, carrying a sense of obligation or assumption. ‘Experience-based Norms’ are shaped by personal encounters and observations, providing a realistic perspective. ‘Acceptable Expectations’ involve the anticipation of satisfactory or adequate performance within the defined standards. ‘Minimum Tolerable Expectations’ represent the lowest acceptable level of performance that an individual is willing to tolerate, acknowledging the potential trade-off between cost and service quality.

While these models underscore the importance of desired service, adequate service, and a broad spectrum of expectations, it is noteworthy that pre-existing beliefs exert a pivotal influence in shaping customers’ benchmarks during service interactions. However, it is essential to recognize that the concept of service expectations may encompass additional components beyond those explicitly outlined in the existing models. Figure 3 introduces a hierarchical representation of expectations for a typical customer, highlighting the intricate and multifaceted nature of their impact on the overall customer experience.

Figure 3 delineates a significant distinction from Figure 2. According to Figure 2, ‘Normative ‘should’ Expectations’ are portrayed as emanating from established standards, embodying a sense of obligation or assumption. ‘Experience-based Norms,’ on the other hand, are shaped by personal encounters and observations, offering a realistic perspective. Figure 3 introduces the concept of ‘Will Expectations’. This expectation level resides between ‘Normative ‘should’ expectations’ and ‘Experience-based Norms,’ signifying a nuanced position in the spectrum of customer expectations.

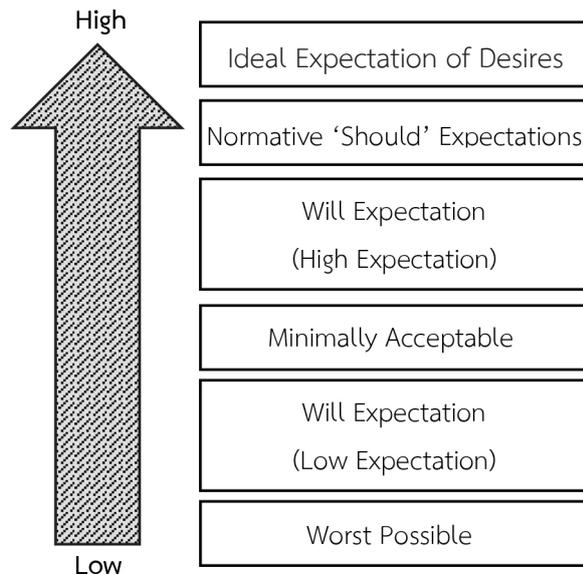


Figure 3 The Expectation Hierarchy
(Gayathri & Rajasankar, 2019)

After a thorough review of existing research including those by Wijaya et al. (2019), it is evident that expectations are significantly influenced by customer experience. Unfavorable experiences generally lead to a decline in the 'Will Expectation', whereas positive experiences tend to elevate it. In a broader sense, the 'should expectation' typically follows an upward trajectory, seldom experiencing a decline. Exceptionally positive experiences have the capacity to raise 'Should Expectations' to an elevated level (Gayathri & Rajasankar, 2019). Consequently, expectations exhibit dynamic changes over time, predominantly improving. At the extremities of this spectrum are the minimally acceptable level, representing the threshold for achieving mere satisfaction, and the worst possible levels, signifying the most undesirable outcome conceivable. When individuals express that a service 'exceeded their expectations', they typically convey

that the actual service quality surpassed their predicted or anticipated level, underscoring the dynamic nature of customer perceptions in evaluating service experiences.

Customer Expectation

Customer expectations constitute an intricate and multifaceted construct, making it challenging to encapsulate them concisely yet meaningfully. In a broader context, expectations encompass pre-existing beliefs that consumers hold about a service, serving as benchmarks during interactions with the service. Hence, marketing researchers, including those by Johnson and Karlay (2018) have focused significantly on comprehending customer satisfaction and service quality as primary objectives. As a result, the influence of expectations has been extensively explored in both disciplines (Watling, 2016).

In today's landscape, customer expectations serve as critical benchmarks for service delivery, acting as standards against which performance is evaluated. Customers assess service quality by comparing their perceptions with these reference points, making a thorough comprehension of customer expectations essential for services marketers. Moreover, customer expectations evolve with technological advancements, reflecting changes in preferences and demands. While Artificial Intelligence (AI) is undoubtedly reshaping the customer experience landscape, it's important to recognize that human interaction remains indispensable in delivering exceptional service. AI empowers businesses to personalize

interactions, automate processes, and provide seamless omnichannel experiences, undoubtedly enhancing overall satisfaction and loyalty (Edelman & Abraham, 2022). However, it's crucial to note that AI complements rather than replaces human touchpoints. Take Hilton Worldwide Holdings Inc., for example, a global hospitality leader that has effectively integrated AI technology into its guest experience. While AI-powered chatbots and virtual assistants personalize interactions and provide instant responses, it's ultimately the human element that ensures guests receive tailored recommendations and exceptional service. By leveraging both AI and human capabilities, Hilton elevates its guests' overall satisfaction and loyalty to the brand (Hilton, 2020). This example underscores the symbiotic relationship between AI technology and human service delivery, illustrating how they work together to meet evolving customer expectations and deliver exceptional experiences in the hospitality industry.

Accurately discerning what customers anticipate represents the initial and arguably the most crucial step in providing high-quality service. Inaccuracy in understanding customer preferences may result in the loss of a customer's business to a competitor that precisely meets their expectations. Furthermore, such inaccuracies may lead to the misallocation of financial, temporal, and other resources on aspects that do not contribute to customer satisfaction. In a fiercely competitive market, being misinformed about customer expectations can even jeopardize the survival of a business.

Types of Customer Expectation

According to Wintermantel (2021) and Mladenov (2022), customer expectations fall into five main categories: explicit, implicit, interpersonal, digital, and dynamic performance. At present time, the evolution of customer expectations includes the integration of AI, as noted by Yehiav (2021), Edelman and Abraham (2022), and Siteman (2023), a trend towards hyper-personalization, and the growing importance of customer experience as a competitive advantage. In the service sector, understanding and effectively managing these diverse customer expectations is crucial for delivering exceptional customer experiences.

1. Explicit expectations: Customers entering a service establishment or engaging with an online platform anticipate specific services within defined parameters, such as pricing structures and service offerings.

2. Implicit expectations: Shaped by external influences and prior interactions, customers hold assumptions about their service experience based on knowledge acquired from similar businesses or recommendations. Meeting these implicit expectations is crucial for fostering positive perceptions.

3. Interpersonal expectations: In the service sector, customers have expectations regarding personal interactions with service providers. Whether in-person, over the phone, or through digital channels, the quality of these interactions significantly influences the overall service experience.

4. Digital expectations: The service industry is increasingly reliant on digital

platforms for customer interactions. Meeting digital expectations involves ensuring a seamless online experience, easy navigation, and simplified processes for making reservations or placing orders.

5. Dynamic performance: In the service industry, dynamic performance is reflected in the ability to adapt services over time to align with evolving customer needs. For instance, a restaurant might enhance its services by introducing online reservation options to accommodate changing customer preferences.

By comprehending and proactively addressing diverse customer expectations within the service industry, businesses can customize their offerings to meet conventional ‘Normative ‘should’ expectations’. Rooted in standards and assumptions, this approach ensures a positive and gratifying customer interaction.

Meeting Customer Expectations

The adherence to established comfort zones is a prevalent consumer behavior, emphasizing the critical importance of consistently aligning with customer expectations. This alignment serves as a key driver for elevating customer loyalty, satisfaction, expanding audience reach, and driving sales growth. Meeting and exceeding customer expectations become a strategic imperative.

According to the Qualtrics XM Institute’s Global Consumer Trends 2023, a notable 60% of large organizations in 2023 plan to intensify efforts to enhance their customer experience compared to the previous year. The increased

focus on customer-centric agility is further underscored by a survey indicating that 65% of small businesses consider it more pivotal post-COVID-19.

Satisfied customers exhibit higher spending tendencies, frequent repeat engagements, and are less prone to seeking alternatives when disappointed. Customers awarding a 5/5-star rating are more than twice as likely to make additional purchases from the same company compared to those providing lower ratings of 1 or 2 stars (Qualtrics XM Institute, 2023).

The significance of customer expectations is underscored by their direct correlation to spending behaviors. Positive experiences, when aligned with expectations, can lead to a remarkable 140% increase in customer spending (Qualtrics XM Institute, 2023). Therefore, companies aiming for present and future success must bridge the gap between customer expectations, as delineated by Wintermantel and Mladenov, and the actual customer experience.

Exceed Customer’s Expectations

Achieving customer satisfaction through the mere fulfillment of expectations may result in a level of moderate contentment. However, such an outcome often falls short of eliciting commendation or fostering repeat business. Customers, having experienced an anticipated service, might explore alternatives provided by competitors to assess varied experiences (Backlund & Holmqvist, 2006).

Hence, the imperative lies in consistently exceeding customer expectations. Unlike the

commonplace nature of meeting expectations, surpassing them necessitates a level of creativity and innovation. It demands the ability to address aspects where competitors may have faltered, distinguishing your offering through a superior and distinctive customer experience (Backlund & Holmqvist, 2006). This proactive approach not only secures customer loyalty but also positions the business as a leader in the competitive landscape.

How to Exceed Customer'S Expectation

Exceeding customer expectations involves a multi-faceted approach, encompassing a deep understanding of customer expectations, consistent alignment, adaptability, digital excellence, proactive management, and a commitment to customer-centric agility. Regularly seeking and incorporating customer feedback further refines strategies for exceeding expectations and fostering long-term customer loyalty.

To exceeding customer expectations, service businesses should proactively address diverse customer needs, customizing offerings to meet 'Normative 'should' expectations'. Rooted in standards, this ensures positive customer interactions. According to Yehiav (2021), Edelman and Abraham (2022), and Siteman (2023), future trends of customer expectations will involve the Integration of AI in customer experience, shift towards hyper-personalization, and rise of customer experience as a competitive differentiator. Businesses need to adapt to these trends by leveraging technology, data-driven insights, and personal-

ized experiences to meet the evolving needs and expectations of their customers. These strategies align with customer-centric theories, as follows:

1. In-depth understanding of expectations: In the service industry, a foundational step towards exceeding customer expectations involves a meticulous understanding of distinct categories, encompassing explicit, implicit, interpersonal, digital, and dynamic performance expectations. This nuanced comprehension forms the cornerstone for tailoring products and services in the service business to seamlessly align with diverse customer anticipations and achieve customer's ideal expectations.

2. Exceeding customer expectations with exceptional service is crucial in today's business landscape, especially considering emerging trends outlined in recent studies. As highlighted by Yehiav (2021), Edelman and Abraham (2022), and Siteman (2023), the future of customer experience is increasingly reliant on the Integration of AI, a Shift Towards Hyper-Personalization, and the Rise of Customer Experience as a Competitive Differentiator. In this context, demonstrating a commitment to exceeding customer expectations involves leveraging technology, data-driven insights, and personalized experiences to deliver exceptional service. For instance, businesses can utilize AI-powered chatbots to provide instant assistance, analyze customer data to tailor recommendations, and offer personalized interactions across various touchpoints. By consistently surpassing initial commitments and leveraging these technological advancements,

such as promising faster delivery times and delivering ahead of schedule, businesses not only foster customer appreciation but also cultivate long-term loyalty and advocacy. Thus, aligning service delivery with evolving customer expectations and leveraging innovative solutions is essential for businesses seeking to thrive in the age of AI-driven customer experience.

3. Facilitate accessibility and prompt responsiveness in the service industry: Ensure your accessibility to customers within the service industry is streamlined through various communication channels, including phone, email, and social media platforms. Promptly address customer inquiries and urgent issues, demonstrating a commitment to timely and efficient service. Actively engage in listening and responding to customer feedback, both in terms of inquiries and sentiments regarding your service business, to maintain an open line of communication and reinforce a customer-centric approach.

These efforts align with Interpersonal expectations, where customers in the service sector anticipate positive and personalized interactions with service providers. Moreover, in the realm of digital expectations, recognizing the increasing reliance on digital platforms for customer interactions, your commitment to prompt responsiveness reflects an understanding of the evolving landscape of customer expectations in the digital age.

4. Demonstrating professional courtesy, patience, and amiability in the service industry is crucial, as these behaviors significantly

contribute to cultivating a positive customer experience. Upholding a professional demeanor characterized by courtesy, patience, and amiability fosters a genuine appreciation for customers' patronage, thereby increasing the likelihood of repeat business. This professionalism in interpersonal interactions plays a pivotal role in enhancing customer satisfaction and loyalty. Additionally, loyalty dimensions, repurchase intent, and satisfaction are interconnected and mutually reinforcing. Satisfied consumers are more likely to display loyalty and exhibit a higher repurchase rate (Curtis et al., 2011).

5. Implementing customer loyalty rewards in the service industry is crucial for enhancing customer retention, fostering an enhanced customer experience, gaining a competitive advantage, collecting valuable data, and building long-term relationships (Górska-Warsewicz & Kulykovets, 2020). Generosity plays a pivotal role in surpassing customer expectations, particularly within the service industry. By consistently rewarding loyal customers with unexpected benefits like additional gifts or exclusive discounts, businesses not only acknowledge and appreciate customer loyalty but also encourage repeat patronage. These rewards programs serve as a strategic initiative to differentiate businesses from competitors and attract and retain customers. Moreover, they contribute to an enhanced overall customer experience by making customers feel valued and appreciated. Through structured loyalty rewards programs, businesses can solidify the customer-business relationship, reinforcing

the perception of their commitment to exceeding expectations and ultimately driving sustained profitability and growth.

6. Accountability for mistakes in the service industry, exemplified by Marriott International's use of the LEARN Model: Acknowledging and rectifying errors is crucial for maintaining trust and credibility in customer interactions. The LEARN Model (Galicic & Ivanovic, 2008), utilized by service industry leaders like Marriott Hotel, emphasizes Listen, Empathize, Apologize, React, and Notify. Promptly admitting errors, issuing sincere apologies, and taking corrective actions are fundamental steps aligned with this model. Consistently upholding accountability reinforces transparent and trustworthy business relationships, reassuring customers of the commitment to rectifying any discrepancies that may arise.

Conclusions

This article commences by emphasizing the pivotal role of customer service in business, highlighting its significance not only for maximizing customer retention but also for cultivating robust relationships with customers. The focus is on understanding the nuanced interplay between customer service and the imperative to meet and exceed customer expectations, informed by insights into future trends of customer expectation through the integration of technology and evolving consumer behaviors.

The satisfaction and delight of customers are increasingly shaped by service expectations, contingent upon their types and the judicious

selection of an appropriate expectations approach. The nature of the service and its objectives dictate the choice of the expectations approach, ensuring performance at least on par with competitors. Customer expectations, being integral to service, serve as a focal point that demands meticulous consideration. Successful companies aspire not only to meet but to exceed customers' expectations comprehensively, spanning product quality to service delivery.

The article delineates five distinct types of customer expectations that warrant concurrent consideration, emphasizing the importance of adeptly managing these expectations. In the current landscape, businesses must adapt to these trends by harnessing technology, data-driven insights, and personalized experiences to exceed customer expectations and maintain a competitive edge. The narrative culminates in a comprehensive exploration of strategies for effectively meeting and exceeding customer expectations. Recognizing that mere satisfaction falls short, the article underscores the need for creative approaches and direct engagement with customers to surpass their expectations.

Recommendation

This article presents a wealth of practical insights, particularly beneficial for businesses operating in the service sector. It provides valuable guidance on meeting and surpassing customer expectations and delves into the various types of expectations encountered in the workplace.

While AI offers potential in exceeding customer expectations, it often falls short due to low user compliance (Adam et al., 2020). To effectively leverage this technology, businesses must understand its nuances and apply it judiciously. Customer expectations serve as crucial benchmarks, evolving alongside technological advancements. While AI enhances service quality, human interaction remains indispensable. Hilton Worldwide Holdings Inc. exemplifies this balance, using

AI for personalized interactions while ensuring human touchpoints for tailored service. This symbiosis drives exceptional customer experiences in the hospitality industry. The application of these insights is key to deriving maximum benefit. It is anticipated that the comprehensive understanding and implementation of the knowledge imparted in this article will contribute significantly to enhanced profitability in business operations.

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Name and Surname: Pitchaya Tiyaratnachai

Highest Education: M.A. in Teaching English as a Foreign Language (TEFL), Silpakorn University

Affiliation: Panyapiwat Institute of Management

Field of Expertise: English of Specific Purposes (Service Business), Business English, and Teaching English as a Foreign Language (TEFL)



Name and Surname: Tanaporn Phurinan

Highest Education: Master of Management Information, Division of Management in the Graduate school of Economics, Teikyo University, Japan

Affiliation: Panyapiwat Institute of Management

Field Of Expertise: Information Management and Business English