



MARKETING OF LAUNDRY AND DRY CLEANING SERVICES IN BENIN CITY

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Abstract

Adopting the survey research design, this study examined the marketing of Laundry and Dry cleaning services in Benin City, Edo State, Nigeria. The population of interest was all laundry firms and their customers in Benin City. The sample however comprised of 200 customers and the managers of 20 laundry and dry cleaning firms in Benin City. Data obtained was analyzed using descriptive statistics and content analysis. Result obtained showed that customers were fairly satisfied on all dimensions of service quality measured. Respondents perceived Laundry firms to have performed least on the reliability dimension. It was also observed that managers of Laundry and Dry cleaning firms had a shallow understanding of marketing strategies. This study therefore recommend that managers of firms in this sector, get professional marketing training so as to be better equipped to tackle the various challenges in their business environment, especially as it relates to strategizing to tackle issues associated with reliability.

Keywords: Dry Cleaning Services, Laundry Services, Service Quality, Servqual

1. Introduction

The service industry covers a wide range of sectors (Kotler & Keller, 2009; Isibor & Odia, 2014), including the laundry and dry cleaning service sector. Bitner (1990) observed that the number of households outsourcing their dirty laundry cleaning to professional companies specializing in such business is gaining attraction. This may not be unrelated to the fact that this form of service does not only save time on the part of busy professionals and home makers but it also delivers clean and treated laundry. Secondly, given the high level of unemployment in Nigeria, this form of business is increasing because it can be setup with little capital.

As with other forms of business organization (Jensen & Markland, 1996; Santos & Matthews, 2001), the issue of quality is essential for the survival of laundry and dry cleaning firms. This is because it is trite knowledge that quality is a major determinant of customer satisfaction (Evbayiro-Osagie, Isibor, & Ihemefor, 2017; Kennedy, 2011; Bedi, 2010; Parasuraman, Berry & Zeithaml, 1985) and thus a strategic weapon for gaining competitive advantage in the marketplace (Mokhlis, Abu Hasan & Yaakop, 2014). Laundry and dry cleaning firms however face a daunting task when it comes to determining what levels of quality is acceptable in cleaning as each customer perceives quality differently (Kyengo, 2007).

Although numerous studies have explored the issue of quality in diverse service settings (Agbonifoh, Isibor & Okere, 2016; Isibor & Odia, 2014; Evbayiro-Osagie, Isibor, & Ihemefor, 2017; Bedi, 2010; Parasuraman, Berry & Zeithaml, 1985), studies on the service quality construct continue to be relevant as they help in unearthing previously latent variables relevant to the concept (Isibor & Odia, 2014). Given the fact that the service industry is now the



backbone of most economies (Kotler & Keller, 2009; Agbonifoh, Ogwo, Nnolim, & Nkamebe, 2007) gaining a robust understanding into the quality construct across different service context is crucial for developing strategies that will enhance service performance.

This study contributes to enriching the literature on service quality by exploring the phenomenon in the laundry and dry cleaning service context. To achieve the objective of the study, a two-side approach was adopted. First, we ascertained the level of satisfaction among laundry customers and their perception of the quality of services offered. Secondly, we explored the strategies employed by these firms and the challenges they face in doing so.

2. Literature Review

Lovelock and Wirtz (2004) define services as acts or performance offered by one party to another. They opined that while the process may be tied to a physical product, performance is often transitory, intangible and does not result in the ownership of any factor of production. Given their nature, services have been described as abstract and elusive construct (Parasuraman, Zeithaml & Berry, 1988). There is however a general consensus that services are intangible, highly perishable, cannot be separated from their provider and heterogeneous (Kotler & Armstrong, 2010; Agbonifoh, Ogwo, Nnolim & Nkamnebe, 2007). In addition, to the above characteristics, time and 'the other people' factors play a crucial role in the rendering and evaluation of services (Odia & Isibor, 2014; Lovelock & Wirtz, 2004). Most organizations fall within the ambit of the service industry (Kotler & Keller, 2009), this is because to a large extent, the offering of most firms consist to a lesser or greater extent of service components (Levitt, 1972).

Laundry and dry cleaning firms offer cleaning services. Kyengo (2007) defines cleaning as a systematic process aimed at removing unwanted matter in the environment. Laundry and dry cleaning exhibits all characteristics of services. It is intangible, cannot be stored, and highly heterogeneous. The perception of relevant 'others' also plays a major role in determining whether a customer will be satisfied. Although laundry and dry cleaning are often used together or interchangeably, Himanshi (2017) notes that both words are not synonymous. He observed that while laundry and dry cleaning are done to remove dirt, both are different in terms of the process by which they do so. While dry cleaning involves the use of chemical (perchloroethylene) to remove stains, laundering on the other hand involves washing with water and soap or other detergents.

Quality may be defined as a customer's overall impression of the relative superiority or inferiority of an organization and its services (Fogli, 2006). In the long run, quality relative to one's competitors has been found to be the single most important variable that guarantees performance, customer loyalty, sustained market share growth and high profitability (Jung, Han, & Oh, 2017; Zeithaml & Bitner, 2003; Buzzell & Gale, 1987).

Huilaja (1998) observed that service quality in laundry and dry cleaning may be viewed from four dimensions namely; technical, functional, aesthetic and process quality. Technical quality in cleaning encompasses cleaning frequency, the applied technology, service organization, control system and follow up as well as the technical and professional skills of cleaning personnel. The functional dimension encompasses the service speed, flexibility and attitude of cleaning personnel. The aesthetic dimension describes how the service is supplied and care with



which the business environment is setup. Process quality measures flexibility in cleaning service provision, how the cleaning provider deals with disaster and emergencies, compliant handling and customer recovery. Bound (2002) therefore suggested that quality in laundry and dry cleaning is determined by such factors as price (cost), customer expectations and needs, reliability of provider, response to disaster and complaints, working efficiency and competitor analysis. As a service, quality in laundry and dry cleaning is also determined by perception of relevant others about a providers' offering.

Although Huilaja (1998) suggested four dimension along which cleaning service quality may be measured, this study adopts the Servqual scale in measuring customers' perception cleaning quality. This is because the Servqual scale encompasses Huilaja's four dimensions and more. The servqual scale was developed from the gap model service quality (Parasuraman, Zeithaml & Berry, 1985). The gap model suggests that there is often a gap between what customers expect and their perception of actual performance of a service provider. According to the model, this gap often arises because service providers do not know what customers expect; select the right service design and standards; deliver on service standards; and match performance with their promises.

Parasuraman *et al.* (1985) opined that customers can only be satisfied when performance exceeds expectation. In 1988, they developed the Servqual scale. The essence of the scale was to enable service providers strategize and measure how well they fared in meeting customer expectations of quality. While the Servqual scale may have been criticized on different grounds (Gilmore, 2003), Lovelock and Wirtz (2004) explained that these criticisms do not serve to undermine the Servqual scale rather they reflect the difficulty in measuring customers' perception of quality. The Servqual scale measures customer perception of quality on five dimensions namely; tangibles, reliability, responsiveness, assurance and empathy.

Parasuraman *et al* (1988) opined that customers irrespective of the service industry, ranked reliability as the most important quality criterion. Andaleeb and Conway (2006) however, observed that in the restaurant industry in the United States, responsiveness of frontline employee was the most important service criterion. In Nigeria, Isibor and Odia (2014) found reliability to be the most important quality dimension in the restaurant industry and responsiveness as the most important in the transportation service sector. Hence, contrary to the observation of Parasuraman *et al* (1988), the importance of each service quality dimension varies across service context depending on the nature of the core business in the sector (Isibor & Odia, 2014).

3. Methodology

The population for this study comprised of all laundry and dry cleaning firms and their customers in Benin City. It was observed that except for the very large ones, many of these firms operated informally and so, were not captured as registered businesses in the City. We therefore, on the basis of judgmental sampling, chose to work with a sample of 20 registered laundry and dry cleaning firms and 200 respondents. Judgmental sampling is best suited for studying a small subset of a large population in which many members of the subset are easily identified but the enumeration of all of them would be nearly impossible (Yomere & Agbonifoh, 1999). In a bid to ensure spread, sample elements were chosen on the basis of



convenience from the four local government areas that make up Benin City (Ikpoba Okha, Ovia North East, Oredo and Egor). Due to the nature of this study, survey involving the use of questionnaire and structured interview were adopted for this study. The questionnaire was adapted from SERVQUAL developed by Parasuraman *et al* (1988). Questionnaires were distributed in recreational and leisure centers to respondents who indicated they use laundry and dry cleaning services. Data obtained from questionnaire were analyzed using descriptive statistics while responses from interview were categorized using content analysis.

4. Results

Of the two hundred (200) questionnaire distributed, one hundred and eighty (90%) were found to be usable. Table 1 shows demographic distribution of respondents. Result indicates that majority of the respondents were male (78.9%), between the ages of 25 – 34 years (45.6%), had obtained a University Degree (78.2%) and earned income less than ₦10,000 (36.1%).

Table 1: Demographic Distribution of Respondents

Variable	Measurement	Frequency	Percentage (%)
Sex	Male	142	78.9
	Female	38	21.1
Age	18 – 24	59	32.8
	25 – 34	82	45.6
	35 – 44	21	11.7
	45 – 54	14	7.8
	55 and Above	4	2.2
Educational Level	Primary	-	-
	Secondary	15	8.33
	Tertiary	140	77.78
	Postgraduate	24	13.3
	Missing	1	0.56
Monthly income	₦10,000 and below	65	36.11
	₦ 10,000 -50,000	33	18.33
	₦ 50,001 -100,000	43	23.89
	₦ 100,001-150,000	10	5.56
	₦ 150,001- 200,000	16	8.89
	Above ₦ 200,000	13	7.22
Total		180	100

Source: Authors' Fieldwork.

Level of Satisfaction and Perception of Service Quality

Respondents' level of satisfaction with laundry services was determined by analyzing overall satisfaction index for the various Servqual dimensions. The satisfaction index was computed based on mean response of customers who had used laundry and dry cleaning services. As indicated by result obtained in Table 2, respondents were satisfied with the services received.



Table 2: Perceived level of satisfaction with laundry and dry cleaning services

Service Quality Dimensions	N	VD	D	U	S	VS	Index
1. The laundry premises (eg neatness and beauty)	180	1 0.6%	6 3.3%	6 3.3%	133 73.9%	34 18.9%	4.07
2. Facilities and equipment	180	2 1.1%	8 4.4%	13 7.2%	128 71.2%	29 16.1%	3.97
3. Employee Dressing	180	- -	28 15.6%	14 7.8%	119 66.1%	19 10.1%	3.72
<i>Tangibility</i>							3.92
4. Operating hours of the laundry and dry cleaning firm	180	- -	8 4.4%	15 8.3%	106 58.3%	51 28.3%	4.11
5. The way or manner you are attended to by employees of the laundry and dry cleaning firm	180	1 0.6%	5 2.8%	3 1.7%	127 70.6%	44 24.4%	4.16
6. The speed with which you are attended to	180	1 0.6%	18 10%	9 5%	112 62.2%	40 22.2%	3.96
7. Quality of service provided	180	- -	2 1.1%	7 3.9%	116 64.4%	55 30.6%	4.24
<i>Reliability</i>							4.12
8. The speed with your complaints are handled	180	- -	9 5%	23 12.8%	112 62.2%	36 20%	3.97
9. The willingness of employees to help customers	180	- -	6 3.3%	27 15%	107 59.4%	40 22.2%	4.01
10. The way customers' problems are handled	180	- -	8 4.4%	27 15%	105 58.3%	40 22.2%	3.98
<i>Responsiveness</i>							3.99
11. The security/safety at the laundry and dry cleaning firm	180	1 0.6%	7 3.9%	27 15%	104 57.8%	41 22.8%	3.98
12. The level of knowledge about their job that employees display	180	2 1.1%	7 3.9%	32 17.8%	111 61.7%	28 15.6%	3.87
13. Employee politeness towards customers	180	1 0.6%	5 2.8%	9 5%	127 70.6%	38 21.1%	4.09
14. Employee honesty with customers.	180	- -	10 5.6%	14 7.8%	119 66.1%	37 20.6%	4.02
<i>Assurance</i>							3.99
15. Efforts made by the laundry and dry cleaning firm to understand my needs	180	- -	6 3.3%	25 13.9%	123 68.3%	26 14.4%	3.94
16. Extent to which the laundry and dry cleaning firm works with your complaints/comments/suggestions	180	1 0.6%	12 6.7%	27 15%	115 63.9%	25 13.9%	3.84
17. The extent to which the laundry and dry cleaning firm seems to have your interest at heart	180	- -	4 2.2%	45 25%	93 51.7%	38 21.1%	3.92



Service Quality Dimensions	N	VD	D	U	S	VS	Index
<i>Empathy</i>							3.90
Your overall perception of service quality in the laundry and dry cleaning firm you have used in the last 6 months?	180	-	2 1.1%	8 4.4%	101 56.1%	96 38.3%	4.32

Note: VD=Very Dissatisfied, D=Dissatisfied, U=Unsure, S=Satisfied, and VS=Very Satisfied

This is because satisfaction index was greater than 3 which is the neutral level (Tangibility 3.92, Reliability 4.12, Responsiveness 3.99, Assurance 3.99 and Empathy 3.90). This is further corroborated by the fact that respondents' assessment of overall level of quality offered amounted to 4.32 on a five point Likert scale. This result supports Caruna (2002) observation that if a customer perceives service quality to be high, such a customer will also report a high level of satisfaction. In terms of perception of the quality of service rendered, customers rated the sector highest in terms of reliability (4.12), followed by responsiveness and assurance (3.99), tangibility (3.92) and perception score was least in terms of empathy (3.90). Hence, unlike in Isibor and Odia (2014) where respondents rated the restaurant and interstate transport sectors to have performed best in terms of reliability and tangibility, and least in terms of responsiveness, respondents rated the laundry and dry cleaning sector to have performed best in terms of reliability but least in terms of empathy.

Strategies employed and Challenges faced by Laundry and Dry cleaning firms

Ferrell and Hartline (2008) describe strategies as an organization's strengths and capability in meeting market needs. During the interview, managers of sampled laundry and dry cleaning firms were asked the marketing strategies they employed and what factors they considered in selecting such strategies. Tables 3 depict responses obtained.

Table 3: Strategies employed by Laundry and Dry cleaning firms

Strategy	Sample Statement	Frequency	Factor Considered
Packaging	"I ensure clothes are neatly packed and customer name tagged on them to avoid mix up"	20	Customer Preference
Home pickup and delivery service	"To ensure convenience, we are ready to pick up and deliver laundry items to our clients"	19	Ability of customer to pay extra charges
Advertising	"we advertise through handbills, posters and bill boards"	17	Cost involved
Price Discount	" I give price discount to my customers"	7	Number of clothes brought and frequency of patronage

Source: Authors' Fieldwork



Aside the strategies listed in Table 3, others mentioned by a few respondents include “*sending customers happy birthday wishes*”, “*ensuring my business environment is tidy, neat and beautiful*”, “*opening of branches for my business in easily accessible locations*” and “*training my staff to respect and render help to customers*”.

In terms of challenges, managers interviewed complained of high and multiple taxation, poor power supply, scarcity of chemicals for washing and unwillingness of financial institutions to give financial facilities (loans and overdraft).

5. Conclusion and Recommendations

Given the importance of quality, issues about service quality will continue to remain at the front burner for marketing practitioners and researchers alike. Although our result indicate that customers are fairly satisfied with the Laundry and Dry cleaning services rendered, firms in this sector scored least in the reliability dimension. There is therefore the need for managers of these firms to better strategize to tackle the challenges associated with reliability. A review of responses obtained from the interview shows that managers in the sector had poor knowledge of marketing strategies, there is the need for them to get professional marketing training so as to be better equipped to tackle the various challenges in their business environment. With the high level of unemployment in Nigeria, laundry and dry cleaning can become an attractive option for would be entrepreneurs. This can however, only happen, if government attends to the challenges identified in this study so that the sector becomes more attractive.

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