Self-service processes still need a helping hand

The way customers perceive efficiency, assistance and convenience has a substantial impact on their satisfaction and subsequent intention to reuse and recommend a service.

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More companies are expanding the service delivery alternatives offered to their customers by combining self-service technology with traditional employee-assisted delivery.

For example, most airlines now offer self-service check-in alongside conventional employee-attended desks.

The provision of self-service alternatives enables firms to increase capacity in a relatively cost-effective way, as well as improve service accessibility and convenience.

However, many customers are often slow to adopt self-service alternatives. Bad experiences in the trial of a new service option can negatively impact customer satisfaction and condition their future use.

The relationship between perceived service quality and customer behavior when processes require greater customer participation remains little understood.

According to some service quality models, customers are likely to accept more responsibility for service outcomes the higher their participation in the delivery process.

That said, while customers may take credit for positive outcomes from a self-service process, studies suggest they are more likely to attribute blame for negative outcomes to the service provider.

To shed light on this issue, Marlene Amorim, of the University of Aveiro, and IESE professors [Alejandro Lago](#) and [Philip Moscoso](#) sought to identify which dimensions of perceived process quality are relevant for customer satisfaction, customer reuse of a service and recommendation to others.

Assessing the checkout experience

The authors conducted a study in a large supermarket that offers customers the choice of using a self-service checkout system or the more conventional employee-assisted approach.

Both types of checkout provide an equivalent service result but require markedly different levels of customer participation.

In the assisted checkout, the scanning, payment and accommodation of the items are performed by employees; in the self-checkout, customers conducted such operations themselves, using a self-service technology.

The study was based primarily on an in-store customer survey of users of both alternatives, who were asked about their perceptions of various aspects of the process.

The process quality dimensions were divided into three main groups:

- *Process efficiency*, including factors such as the speed and effectiveness of the scanning and payment operations, and the safety of the transaction.
- *Process assistance*, including the quality, responsiveness and effectiveness of employee interactions.
- *Process convenience*, in relation to the service layout and the length of customer wait time.

The survey revealed that customers consider a rich set of dimensions when it comes to assessing the quality of a service process design.

What's more, the various process dimensions — efficiency, assistance and convenience — have varying impacts on customer satisfaction and future behavior intentions.

Lending a helping hand

By far, the most important factor in terms of overall customer satisfaction was process assistance, confirming the crucial role employees play in providing a high-quality service.

Paradoxically, the results of the survey suggest that the employee role was even more important in services involving greater customer participation — that is, in the self-service setup.

This highlights the importance of ensuring that well-trained employees are on standby to offer support to customers as they navigate the self-service process.

It's worth noting that employee assistance seemed to be a far more important issue among female customers than male customers.

Customer convenience

The other major factor in shaping customer perceptions of service quality was process convenience.

Improvements in process convenience appear to have a strong impact on customer intentions to reuse the service alternative, particularly in the case of the self-service option.

This confirms the significance of perceived convenience — such as waiting less time in line — in shaping customers' willingness to use service alternatives requiring more participation and effort on their part.

The results suggest that service providers can differentiate their initiatives to improve customer service quality according to the operational characteristics of each delivery alternative.

For example, they should be mindful that in service processes requiring active customer participation, customers are less tolerant of inconveniences in the access and utilization of the service.

Conversely, in self-service alternatives, customers appear to be less concerned about the efficiency of the process operations.

Perhaps most importantly, companies should pay particular attention to the quality and level of assistance offered by employees, who seem to play key roles in the customers' adoption of service processes requiring more participation and effort.

This flies in the face of accepted wisdom, which holds that self-service technology represents a like-for-like replacement of conventional services offered by employees.

Instead, companies should strive to ensure that customers willing to try out the self-service option are offered as much help as they need by well-trained employees, despite the extra work this may entail.

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