CONSUMER SATISFACTION WITH OCCUPATIONAL SERVICES: QUALITY, FREQUENCY, ATTITUDES, AND INFORMATION SOURCES

Howard G. Schutz, University of California at Davis
Marianne Casey, University of California at Davis

ABSTRACT

Mail survey sampling of Sacramento service consumers indicated that service quality was not considered satisfactory by the majority of respondents. Satisfaction levels varied with the type of service -- professional services rated higher than less specialized services. Satisfaction was closely related to service quality; however, its relationship to frequency-of-use varied with service type.

INTRODUCTION

It has been projected that more than half the nation's economic activity will center on providers of services rather than products in the present decade. Employment for jobs in services is increasing and consumer spending for services is expected to triple during the 1980's. A higher proportionate amount of spending is for services with families estimated to expend 49% of personal consumption to services (U.S. News and World Report, 1980). This growing demand for consumer services emphasizes the current need for more research specifically regarding consumer satisfaction/dissatisfaction.

Most general satisfaction dissatisfaction studies in the literature have focused primarily on products rather than services or included only a few consumer services. However, when service purchases have been included among surveyed items, services have been consistently rated less satisfactory than products (Best & Andreasen, 1976; Schutz, 1979). Some recent research has addressed this issue and the reasons for such differences in satisfaction levels, as well as examining the determinants of differences between products and services for consumer evaluation and marketing (Zeithaml, 1980; Queich, 1980).

This paper examines research concerned only with consumer services. Information was obtained for sixteen different service providers, representing various professional services, repair services and personal services. The objective of this research is to determine the satisfaction levels for various consumer services and the association of these satisfaction levels with attitudes toward services, frequency of use, demographic characteristics of consumers, and information sources used by consumers for services. These findings can supplement the scant literature specifically regarding consumer services and help identify particularly troublesome consumer services. It has been well documented that only a small percentage of consumer complaints are actively voiced to some third party complaint agency or, in fact, even to the service provider himself (Best & Andreasen, 1976; Schutz, 1979). Therefore, the findings presented in this paper will point to problem areas to be addressed by those involved with regulation, consumer protection and education.

METHODOLOGY

A mail survey was conducted with a sample of 1000, using the Sacramento, CA telephone directory as the sampling frame. A fixed interval method of selection was utilized. The data was collected during October-December 1980, using the following fourwave mailing technique (Dillman, 1978): first, a letter and questionnaire; second, a reminder postcard one week later; third, another letter and questionnaire after three weeks; fourth, a certified letter and questionnaire six weeks from the original mailing. This mailing method yielded a response rate of 63% of all deliverable questionnaires (N=536). No statistically significant differences were found in the cross-tabulation of 50 of the variables relative to week of response-return indicating minimal non-response bias. Also, telephone calls were made to fifty non-respondents who were asked six questions chosen at random from the survey. Responses to five of the six questions were not significantly different from those of the respondents and the sixth reflected no monotonic changes relative to those who had completed the questionnaire. This suggests that possible non-response bias should play an insignificant role in the analysis of the collected data.

The sample was predominantly male (54%), married (68%), living in single-family homes (76%), employed (54%), white (87%), better educated (74% some college or more), middle income (61% $20,000 or more yearly income), and older (59% 41 or older). The demographics of the sample were about identical to Sacramento data for ethnic representation and marital status, however this sample consisted of a higher representation of older respondents with higher income and more education than statewide population statistics. This is a bias commonly found in mail survey studies.

RESULTS

The questionnaire was designed to be basically exploratory in nature. Thus, in addition to the satisfaction information, respondents were also queried about their general attitudes towards consumer services, frequency of use, governmental regulation of pricing, advertising and qualifications, and the importance of twelve characteristics to consider when making a decision about which service provider to choose.

TABLE 1
GENERAL INFORMATION RESULTS

A. Overall Quality of Consumer Services		
Very Good	3.1 %	N = 523
Good	32.7	
Fair	48.6	
Poor	14.0	
Very Poor	1.7	
B. In Past Ten Years has Quality		
Increased	10.8%	N = 524
Stayed the Same	29.2	
Decreased	50.0	
C. Cost of Service to Consumer		
Extremely High	33.8 %	N = 528
High	57.3	
Average	7.8	
Low	1.1	
Extremely Low	0.0	

Table 1 presents the results of the introductory general information questions. The overall quality of consumer services was viewed as "very good" or "good" by 36% of the respondents, with nearly half (49%) of the sample responding "fair." Regarding the direction the quality of services has taken over the last ten years, 50% of the sample reported a "decrease" and only 21% reported an "increase." The respondents were almost unanimous (91%) in their opinion about the cost of services to the consumer as being "extremely high" or "high."

TABLE 2

CONSUMER ATTITUDES ABOUT SERVICE ISSUES

	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Neither	Agree	Strongly Agree	N
I feel there is a high risk associated with poor choice of services.	0.8%	4.3%	7.6%	63.9%	23.5%	513
I feel there is too little information available to make a good choice about service providers.	0.8	17.1	9.0	54.8	18.3	520
I feel there is great variability of competence among service providers.[1]	1.2	5.4	4.2	58.4	30.8	519
I feel too uneasy to complain about problem with a service to the provider.[2]	23.1	47.0	6.8	20.4	2.7	515
I feel that a more experienced provider gives a better quality of service.[3]	1.0	17.6	13.4	53.5	14.5	516
I wish advertisements for services included more useful consumer information	0.8	3.3	9.0	58.3	28.6	521
I think consumers have difficulty recognizing the type of service needed.	1.2	28.0	14.3	49.7	6.8	511
I think consumers often don't realize the service provider's lack of ability.	0.2	9.7	5.4	69.1	15.5	515
I usually feel confident that I have chosen a competent service provider	0.6	20.6	19.3	55.0	4.6	518
I like to keep using the same service provider for as long as possible.	0.6	4.7	9.7	70.2	14.9	516
I find it difficult to locate satisfactory new service providers when I move to a new area.[4]	0.4	17.1	22.1	45.1	15.3	503

[1] Respondents with higher income, professional occupation, more education were more likely to agree.

[2] Respondents with higher education were more likely to disagree.

[3] Older respondents were more likely to agree. Female respondents and those with higher education were more likely to disagree.

[4] Older respondents were more likely to agree.

Consumer Perceptions of Service Issues

The study contained a series of statements concerning service providers for respondents to indicate the extent to which they agree or disagree. The results are presented in Table 2. Nearly 90% of the sample agree that there is great variability of competence among service providers and 87% agree that there is a high risk associated with poor choice of services. These high percentages indicate the high level of responsibility the consumer feels for his satisfaction with the service and corroborate the hypothesis that consumers perceive greater risks when buying services than products. Furthermore, consumers voice a strong opinion for more help in making choices about service providers as evidenced by the 87% who "wish advertisements for services included more useful information" and the 73% who agree that "there is too little information available to make a good choice about service providers." It has been suggested that one reason for the higher dissatisfaction with services than products may be consumers' ignorance of their role in production and consumption of services. Prior to consumption it may be difficult to judge professional or specialists services. Over half of the respondents (57%) agree that "consumers have difficulty recognizing the type of service needed", with less than 30% in disagreement. To make a stronger point, 85% agreed that "consumers often don't realize the service provider's lack of ability", with only 10% in disagreement.

This finding presents data to support the hypothesis that attributes some consumer dissatisfaction with services to their own inability to specify or perform their part of the service. Seventy percent "do not feel too uneasy to complain about a problem with a service to the provider" or in any case did not report so in their response. On the other hand, 23% do, in fact, "feel too uneasy to complain." The statement "I usually feel confident that I have chosen a competent service provider" had 60% of respondents in agreement and 21% in disagreement.

Although barely more than half of the respondents expressed confidence in their service provider choices, findings do indicate a certain amount of loyalty to that choice. This is evident as 85% of the sample agreed that they "like to keep using the same service provider for as long as possible." Interestingly, only 18% of the respondents disagreed with the statement "a more experienced provider gives a better quality of service." While the 68% who agreed with that statement tended to be older respondents, those in disagreement are more likely to be female and those with high education. Finally, more than half (60.4%) of all respondents agree that "it's difficult to locate satisfactory new service providers when I move to a new area."

Satisfaction and Quality

The frequency of satisfaction responses (as well as for all attitudes and demographic questions) to each of the sixteen services were calculated by use of the Statistical Package for Social Sciences (SPSS) (Nie, 1975) Frequency program. The satisfaction results are displayed in Table 3. Examination of this table reveals that among the professions, dentists and physicians have the highest level of satisfaction while lawyers fall at a much lower level. Among the repair oriented services electrician fares the best and auto repair is the poorest of all services examined. The order of these results is much the same for the same services as was found in a statewide California study (Schutz, 1979) and in other reported results of national population samples.

The relationship between satisfaction and quality might be most parsimoniously hypothesized as one of a high positive relationship. Alternatively, a consumer could have a low estimate of quality, and thus, expect less from a service and still be satisfied. The means in Table 4 for satisfaction and quality, the rho between them and the individual service crosstabulations all support the first hypothesis, that quality and satisfaction is viewed in the same way. The rho was 0.97 and all the crosstabulations had χ^2 significances at less than .001. This may be a condition that is truer for services than products since consumers may associate the concept of quality in the way they are given service with what is satisfying more than they do with goods where the items are more transient in nature and less personalized.

Satisfaction and Frequency

The relationship between frequency of use and satisfaction could be posited as a high positive relationship since for goods consumers tend to repurchase the items for which they are satisfied. However, with services this might not hold true in a general sense but only to individual practitioners. The complete nonpurchase of a service may not be as feasible as it is with goods since for many services the consumer generated substitutes are not as easily available. Thus, overall we would not expect a high relationship with our total group of services between frequency and satisfaction but could, perhaps, find a significant relationship for particular services. Evidence on the overall hypothesis can be seen in Table 4 in which the means are given and the rho of 0.50 is calculated. A low but significant relationship is found between satisfaction and frequency.

For the individual services, a significant χ^2 was found in crosstabulations for physicians, dentists, barber/beauticians, health/fitness, and dry cleaners. All of these also had moderate size gammas indicating a monotonic trend for increased frequency to go with increased satisfaction. For physicians and dentists, consumers may have gone to them only when necessary when not satisfied, but when satisfied use them on a more prophylactic basis. Barber/beauticians can be substituted rather easily by home barbering, health/fitness by home exercise, and dry cleaners can be avoided by purchase of clothing which can be laundered. Among other services, use level may be so infrequent and/or not easily replaced that there is no simple use-satisfaction relationship, such as in the case of lawyers.

Information Sources

As discussed earlier, consumers recognize a great variability of competence among service providers and expressed a desire that more consumer information be available and advertisements be more useful. It is not surprising, therefore, that respondents reported such a high level of reliance for information about service providers from personal sources. The data on use of family/friends and other sources of consumer information are presented in Table 5. Eighty eight percent of the sample reported using family or friends for dentist' and physician services with lawyers and barber/beauticians following at a slightly lower percentage. Perhaps for professional services that allow little advertising, it is more necessary to depend on personal sources. TV and appliance repair and pest control rank lowest in the use of family/friends as information sources, the services also rank fairly low in satisfaction levels. Auto repair appears to be the contradicting service, ranking fifth highest in personal source use and lowest in satisfaction. This

TABLE 3

SATISFACTION RATINGS FOR 16 SURVEYED SERVICES

	Satisfactory 1	Somewhat Satisfactory 2	Somewhat Dissatisfactory 3	Dissatisfactory 4	N	$\bar{X}$	S.D.	C.V.
Dentist	76.6[1]	17.9	4.5	1.0	487	1.300	.60	.46
Barber/Beautician	73.7	19.1	5.5	1.7	471	1.352	.66	.49
Physician	70.1	20.4	7.8	1.7	515	1.412	.71	.50
Dry Cleaner	63.9	29.4	4.2	2.6	429	1.455	.70	.48
Music Instruction	58.3[2]	32.7	5.0	4.0	199	1.548	.77	.50
Electrician	54.6	28.4	13.3	3.7	324	1.660	.84	.51
Health/Fitness	51.5	34.6	8.5	5.4	260	1.677	.84	.50
Plumber	46.3[1]	34.7	13.2	5.8	326	1.785	.89	.50
Lawyer	50.8	26.7	12.5	10.0	311	1.817	1.00	.55
House Painter	44.0	35.6	13.8	6.7	225	1.831	.91	.50
TV Repair	44.6	33.7	13.5	8.3	386	1.855	.95	.51
Appliance Repair	43.1	34.6	13.8	8.5	341	1.877	.95	.51
Pest Control	44.4	29.2	17.7	8.7	288	1.906	.98	.51
Building Contractor	39.4[2,3]	29.9	18.7	11.7	250	2.024	1.02	.50
Real Estate	40.4	28.9	14.2	16.5	280	2.068	1.10	.53
Auto Repair	35.6	30.0	20.2	14.2	450	2.131	1.05	.49

[1]Females more satisfied $p < .01$

[2]Females more satisfied $p < .05$

[3]> Education more satisfied $p < .05$

may be a particularly troublesome occupation though the problem is not clearly with the provider or consumer. It has been suggested that consumers rely more on personal sources when seeking a service provider, however these data show there is a great variability over the 16 occupations looked at in this study.

CONCLUSIONS

The results of this study of 16 consumer services indicate that service quality is not viewed as satisfactory by a majority of the respondents. The quality of services is considered to have decreased in the past ten years and the cost is regarded as very high. Strong opinions about several general service issues were voiced - among them were a desire that better information be made available, for more useful advertisements, a belief that there is a high risk associated with a bad service choice and that there is great variability among service providers, and finally, difficulty in evaluating a service provider's ability. Clearly these are areas of concern to many consumers.

The satisfaction levels by individual occupation varied widely with services of a professional nature rated somewhat higher than several less specialized-education occupations. In particular, auto repair ranked lowest in general satisfaction, suggesting some additional attention would be useful. Quality of service is highly and positively related to satisfaction for all occupations; however, the relationship of frequency of service use and satisfaction depends more on the type of service and the overall relationship is less strong. The demographic characteristic most strongly associated with service satisfaction is being female. Satisfaction was not found to be significantly related to income, education, occupation or age although these characteristics were associated with specific attitudes towards service issues.

TABLE 4

SATISFACTION, FREQUENCY AND QUALITY MEANS FOR 16 SERVICES

Consumer Service	Satisfaction 1=satisfactory 4=dissatisfactory $\bar{X}$	Frequency 1=weekly, more often 4=rarely, never $\bar{X}$	Gamma[1]	N	Quality 1=very high 5=very poor $\bar{X}$	Gamma[2]	N
Dentist	1.3	3.1***	.29	513	2.0***	.85	484
Barber	1.3	2.3***	.30	520	2.2***	.88	470
Dry Cleaner	1.4	2.8**	.27	515	2.5***	.69	424
Physician	1.4	2.9**	.21	529	2.2***	.90	512
Music	1.5	3.8		499	2.5***	.71	192
Health/Fitness	1.6	3.3***	.36	498	2.5***	.74	261
Electrician	1.6	3.9		515	2.7***	.75	318
Plumber	1.7	3.9		515	2.7***	.73	316
Housepainter	1.8	3.9		508	2.8***	.79	229
T.V. Repair	1.8	3.8		520	2.8***	.79	377
Appliance Repair	1.8	3.7		512	2.8***	.76	338
Lawyer	1.8	3.8		510	2.6***	.83	217
Pest Control	1.9	3.7		514	2.9***	.75	282
Building Contractor	2.0	3.9		508	2.9***	.77	246
Real Estate	2.0	3.9		506	2.9***	.83	285
Auto Repair	2.1	3.1		517	2.9***	.82	443

[1] Significance of Satisfaction with Frequency, rho = 0.50; $p = .05$.

[2] Significance of Satisfaction with Quality, rho = 0.97; $p < .001$.

** $p < .01$.

*** $p < .001$.

TABLE 5

INFORMATION SOURCES FOR CONSUMER SERVICES

Service	Family/Friends Information Source N[1]	Media Ads Yellow Pages Home Distributed Ads Source N	% of Total Information Sources That Are Family/Friends %
Dentist	396	50	88.8
Physician	364	49	88.1
Lawyer	225	64	77.9
Barber	318	99	76.3
Auto Repair	235	160	59.5
Music	90	65	58.1
Housepainter	111	82	57.5
Building Contractor	103	98	54.0
Real Estate	137	121	53.1
Health/Fitness	111	127	46.7
Electrician	127	154	45.2
Dry Cleaner	148	215	40.8
Plumber	102	186	37.6
TV Repair	130	220	37.2
Pest Control	67	189	29.0
Appliance Repair	76	237	24.3

[1] Total Sources N differs for each consumer service because of respondent use variability.

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