

**QUALITY AND CUSTOMER SATISFACTION
IN PUBLIC SERVICES**

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Abstract: *Quality represents one of the most important aspects that have to be considered for public services, as well as it is for common ones. This is strongly reflected in the customer satisfaction and determines its behavior. The service quality could be measured by a set of indexes according with the type of service and the customers' expectations. The particularities of the public services rise up the necessity of establishing a similar set of quality indexes. Firstly, this will contribute to improve the quality and to obtain a better fit with the customer expectation. At the same time, an analysis of how quality affects the customer satisfaction could be a start up point in redesigning the public services. The first step of the process to determine the effects of quality in customer behavior is to identify all the elements that contribute to customer satisfaction. Secondly, it has to be assessed the quality degree of influence on customer satisfaction as against other elements. Thirdly, it could be done a comparison of the quality degree of influence on common and public services, effects and customer reactions.*

The customer behavior represents, for the companies trading goods and services, a bench mark for adjusting their goods and services and planning their production. The customer behavior is important and, therefore scrutinized, as the way a customer takes a decision to buy represents an important parameter in designing the marketing mix. .

Thus, it is useful to know the factors that influence the customer behavior. These can be classified as follows:

- condition factors;
- behavior factors.

In the following table these factors are shown, in detail:

Table 1

Condition factors	demographic	- age
		- civil status
		- gender
		- children, number and age
		- religion
		- nationality/regionalism
		- residence place
	socio-economic	- revenue
		- education
		- profession
		- social status
		- wealth

	psiho-economic	- mentality
		- knowledge
		- values
		- needs
		- interests
		- intentions
Behavior factors	Life style	- expenditure style
		- shopping style
		- informing style
		- planning style
		- degree of influence
		- resistance to changes
	offer (proposed mix)	- product
		- price
		- distribution
		- advertisement
		- staff

We shall try to focus especially on the behavior factors connected to the offer, and the marketing mix, implicitly proposed by the offered, and its components.

Thus, we consider that there is a link between the product quality, the client satisfaction and his subsequent behavior. The product quality, in our case the public services, is pointed out in the product component. Before pointing out the bond between the quality and the customer behavior one has to clarify the difference between needs and desire as a starting point.

Consumers have both needs and desires, and it is very difficult to make a precise distinction between them. From this point of view, those being aware of their needs and considering anything above this level as desire have a realistic perception of the way their needs are satisfied. The consumers that mix the needs with their desires have a distorted perception and a low degree of satisfaction.

The public service has the role to serve and satisfy the public need. This can be identical with the individual need or it can be, often, under its level, which is, as we have shown, very difficult to define from desire.

The desire is based on the entire complex of above mentioned factors and it brings about a certain type of behavior. An eloquent example is the distribution of water : in the case that in a rural place, without current water distribution, such a system is achieved, based on the free fall of water (with no pressure in the pipe), the flow of water being dependent on the climate fluctuations (rains/droughts) and thus an irregular distribution of water, this would be looked upon as a serious shortcoming of the quality under the conditions of an urban place with drinking water available with constant pressure 24 hours in 24 .

The most public services represent solutions to the social matters and needs. Their cost is sustained by the consumer or the state, but in a minimum level. They have also a cost assessed as a profit for society. From this perspective a part of the clients can be frustrated as they cannot pay more to get a better service. Mostly, irrespective of the purchasing power, the customer is not content with the quality of the offered public service.

The satisfaction of the public services users, according to a number of authors is:

$$\text{Satisfaction} = \text{perception} - \text{expectations}$$

Another form of representation, proposed by Mudie Peter, Pirrie Angela for the user satisfaction is shown in figure 1 , and the forming of the expectations is according to figure 2..

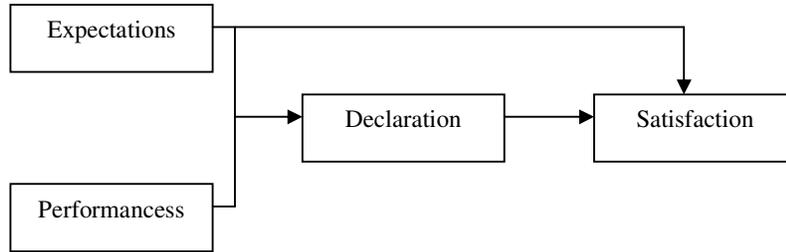


Fig.1 Model for determining the satisfaction

Forming the expectations has an important component that depends on previous knowledge, information received from other consumers, remarks. Usually, the negative connotations have a higher impact than those positive. Correct and complete information can rule out the risk of very high expectations against the supplier performance and implicitly the birth of a state of dissatisfaction.

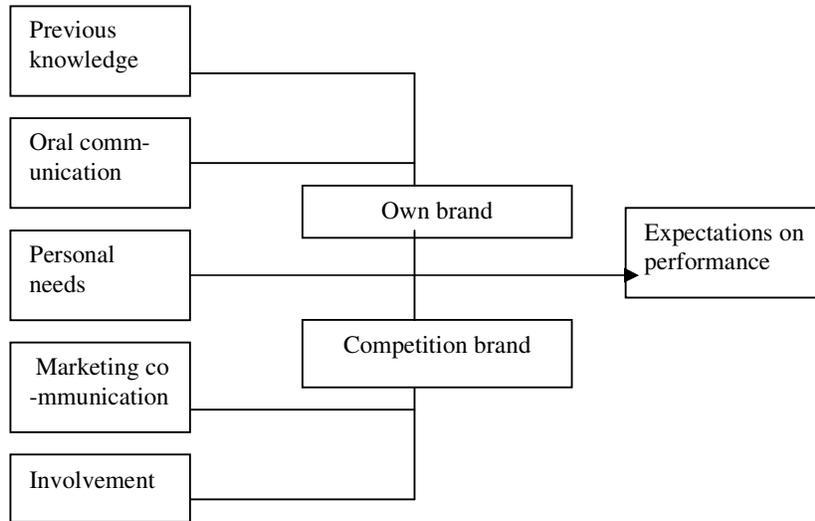


Fig.2 Forming expectations

To determine user's expectations and their perception, marketing studies are needed. The user expectations are, mostly, higher than what the public authority can offer. These have been divided in 4 categories as follows:

- unrealistic
- un lucrative
- unachievable
- unreasonable.

A comparison between the public sector consumer approach and that of the private one can be so summarized: „The private companies exist for achieving sales and profit. The client satisfaction is a vehicle to this end, not the end in itself. This justifies the higher manipulation of consumers, than expected (under normal circumstances) in the public sector. But the category of citizen as consumer ignores a lot of delicate aspects coming from the marketing practice of the private sector companies.”

During purchasing process the consumer takes a series of secondary decisions as the following:

1. decisions regarding the brand /quality;
2. decisions regarding the seller;
3. decision on quantity;
4. decisions regarding the time of purchase;
5. decisions regarding the way of payment.

Out of these, in purchasing public services only the quantity decision remains for the consumer, the other ones represent preestablished conditions by the public authority and the service supplier.

The consumer has different forms to claim the improvement of the service quality, the settlement of the problems or even compensation in the case of prejudices, as a consequence of poor quality, late supply or incomplete services, etc.

Companies, in their turn, can resort to a large range of ways to compensate the prejudices caused and to diminish the degree of dissatisfaction, especially they try to determine the grounds that caused the client dissatisfaction.

The suppliers are concerned by creating the most interesting mixes for attracting a bigger number of client and afterwards are concerned to maintain them. The service quality is one of the most frequent aspect in debate and analysis to see if it meets the clients hopes. From this point of view, consumers are activated to express their opinions on the services and the ways of improving them. Solving the consumers unsatisfactions represent the way of keeping them in the clients portfolio.

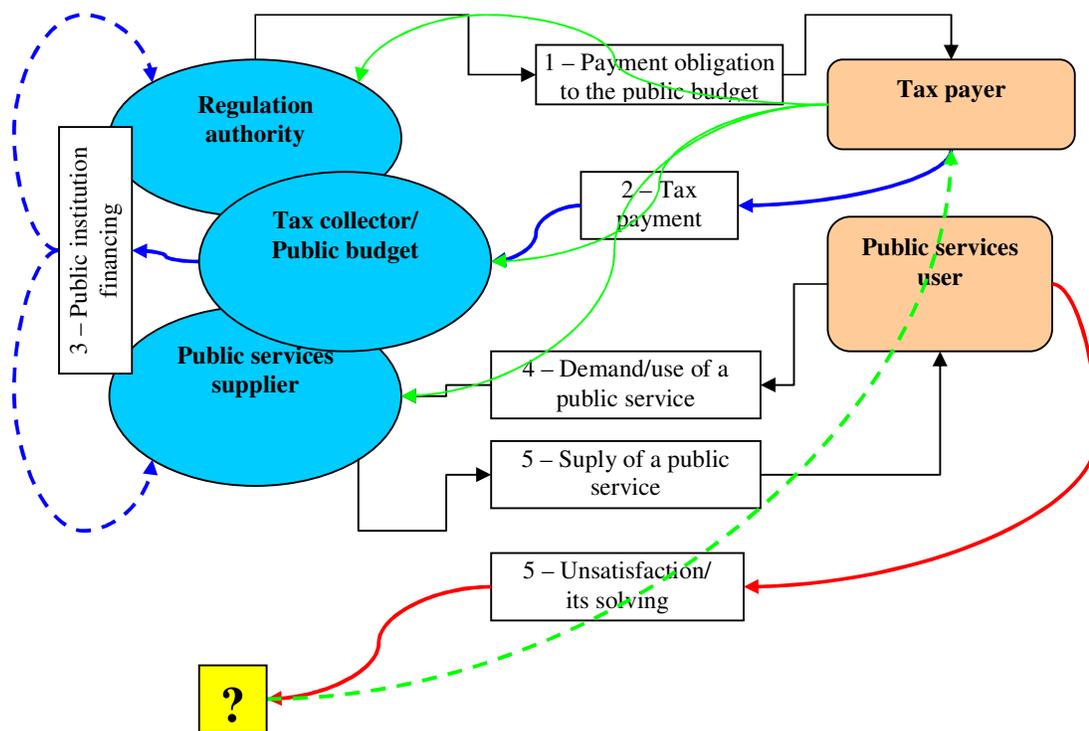


Fig.3: Anti-competition mechanism of public sector

A quality of a service under any expectation determines the exclusion of that company from the list of the potential suppliers under the purchasing process of decision. It is not the same with the public services, where the change of the supplier of services is very difficult or even impossible. The supply of public services creates a relationship mechanism as in the scheme proposed by fig.3.

The supply of a public administrative service can be done on a previous request of the beneficiary, as for instance the medical service or, it is supplied and then used, as in the instance of roads and parks maintenance. Their quality can be denounced by the consumer but the late will have no individual and immediate feed-back. It is also true that the claim and unsatisfaction of the consumer depends on the way this determines the degree of unsatisfaction in comparison with the need and desire.

The payment mechanism of a public service can be direct or not, often having a difficult way of achievement through financing from the public budget, even when it is direct and based on price lists approved by law by the public authority.

As there is a strong link between the price and quality, the purchasing decision being taken mostly based on a multicriterial analysis, where the relation price-quality has

the central place, the consumer dissatisfaction is grater when it is brought about by both elements, not only the quality.

Thus, it is often set forth the fact that one pays for unsupplied services „ we don't know what we pay as we get nothing” or one pays for a doubtful quality „ we pay a lot of money for ... you see what...”.

All these lead to the conclusion that the level of quality represents an essential element for the customer dissatisfaction regarding the public services, connected, very often, with the price level.

Finally, the public services suppliers have to pay a grater attention to the quality of their services, to the ratio quality-price but also, to a campaign for the identification of the public needs and the consumers expectations, in view of establishing and informing the citizens which is the quality level of the supplied public service.

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