

Drop the right service clues

Customers look for telltale signs to help them sum up their service experiences



Clues such as body language and tone of voice influence customers' perception of service quality.

IN CHOOSING and using services, customers frequently behave like "detectives" as they search for information and organise their perceptions into a set of feelings about the service.

For example, everything on a restaurant table – the table cloth, paper or cloth napkins and cleanliness – potentially communicates to customers. That assessment is then combined with reactions to the presentation of the meal and the food itself.

Customers actively process stimuli that can help inform their choices and influence their feelings about the experience.

Here are the following types of service clues customers use to judge their service experience:

1 Functional clues

These clues refer to the technical quality of the service, particularly relating to whether the service is performed competently. It is the accuracy and efficiency of the service. For example, tasteful, fresh and wholesome food served at an appropriate temperature and appropriate pacing of the meal are functional clues.

While functional clues are the foundation of the dining experience, they constitute only part of that experience.

2 Mechanical clues

These are non-human elements in the service environment, consisting of ambient factors and conscious design of space to create certain effects in buyers to enhance their purchase decisions. For exam-

ple, white linen tablecloths, smell, music, colour, photos of events, crystal chandeliers and soft lighting, serve as mechanical clues.

In Hard Rock Cafe, for example, customers are surrounded by authentic rock and roll memorabilia, such as a guitar signed by John Lennon or a leather jacket worn by Elvis Presley.

These mechanical clues establish the Hard Rock brand. Research has also shown that music volume and tempo influence the amount of time and money consumers spend in retail and restaurant establishments.

Mechanical clues are especially important in services marketing because the intangibility of the offering leads customers to rely on tangibles to evaluate the experience. The mechanical clues in the service environment assist customers in understanding and interpreting the service.

3 Human clues

The behaviour of employees in providing a service also provides powerful clues that contribute to customers' perceptions of service quality.

Human clues consist of the behaviour of service employees, including body language, tone of voice, and choice of words used. For example, a warm, friendly smile and sincere greeting illustrate human clues.

A service employee's pacing in serving a meal and attention to the customers' readiness for the next course influence perceptions of service quality. In inseparable services where both the customer and service employee must be present,

human clues influence customers' perception of service quality.

How customers assess employees' efforts and service performance are found to have a strong effect on their satisfaction and loyalty. Thus, while mechanical clues can set the stage by influencing customers' expectations, human clues typically play a prominent role in influencing the customer's perception of the service experience.

In effect, customers look for tangible clues to help inform their expectations of a service. While customers' perceptions of mechanical clues are positively related to their expectations of the service, human clues dominate the influence of mechanical clues.

A rude or aloof service employee can effectively ruin a customer's experience, even if the meal was prepared properly. Ideally, functional, mechanical and human clues must be managed in a consistent way to enhance the customer's service experience.

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