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# **SERVICE DELIVERY AT SPORT FISHING TOURIST DESTINATIONS**

**BY**

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## **ABSTRACT**

This study examines the difference between sport tourists individuals' perceptions of the services that should be offered to the services that were actually offered, using a sport fishing destination as a case study. The Servqual scale, a means in which to evaluate consumers' expectations and cross-reference them with their perceptions of that service, was utilized.

A total of 31 surveys was returned out of the 60 sent. From the statistical analysis, overall customers' expectations of the services offered were similar to what was received, however when individual variables were examined some discrepancies were found. Future research for sport tourist destinations should be done on an individual bases, examining all components of service delivery in order to further understand the needs of sport tourists.

## **INTRODUCTION**

Service is an extremely important component of any socially interactive business, without appropriate services a business will not flourish. This is especially true in sports tourism businesses, where people who engage in a sport are not purchasing an actual good, but are instead purchasing an experience. This experience can be made enjoyable through the provision of proper services. If customers are not happy with a good it can simply be returned, if customers are not happy with a service, the customers will simply not return.

Front line service delivery incorporates all of the aspects of services that involve direct interaction with the customers. This study examined the types of service currently offered at a sport fishing tourist destination, and if this destination produces the key components needed to provide efficient service. Using the Serqual scale five different service related

variables were examined from the customers perspective. An indication of the destination's service performance on the front line was determined based on the differences between people's expectations of the services, and the services they actually received. From the data gathered and analyzed this study provides insight for sport tourism destinations, using a sport fishing destination as a case study, on how they can evaluate, improve, and market their services and destinations.

## RELATED LITERATURE

The provision of service is the set of activities performed by a company that interacts with its customers, to ensure their satisfaction. This simplistic definition has been expanded by Bender (1) to explain service as encompassing the personnel, facilities, equipment, methods, and information needed to perform customer service activities. According to Bender (1) the purpose of service is to satisfy the needs of current customers to ensure that they remain active customers. Bender (1) argues that service is one of a company's means of fulfilling its obligations to customers. Service involves more than consumption, it embodies any activity that deals with any type of interaction with the consumer (11).

Mangold and Babakus (7) argue that expectations are formed as a result of consumers past experiences, word of mouth communications, and personal needs. According to Mangold and Babakus (7) these expectations affect how consumers will eventually perceive the service delivered. "The key to providing superior service is understanding and responding to customer expectations" (8).

Reliability is something customers expect; the ability to perform the promised service dependably and accurately (8). Accompanying

reliability, customers want assurance when dealing with employees. Assurance involves the employees being knowledgeable and courteous, along with employees ability to convey trust and confidence (8). Fick and Ritchie (5), argue customers wanted high reliability, and high assurance, and that these are the most important factors when dealing with a tourist service company.

Reliability and assurance are important when dealing with customer expectations, however there are other factors that contribute to meeting customer expectations. One of these expectations to be met by a service company is the ability to form relationships. Parasuraman, Berry, and Ziethaml (8) argue that customers want ongoing personalized relationships with the same representatives. The representative should initiate the contact with customers, as well as be someone who knows and cares about those customers. Customer relationships are seen as more important than exceeding customer expectations (8).

Parasuraman, Berry, and Ziethaml (8) also argue that apart from building relationships, customers expect fair play. Fair play is seen by customers as companies taking time to explain policies and practices to the customers. In order to demonstrate fair play, customers want regular two-way communication, which creates a more trusting relationship between the customers and company (8). Managing promises made or implied is important in order to comply with customers' expectations. If promises are made too high for what the company provides, customers' expectations will not be met. Meeting expectations is greatly enhanced if the promises better reflect the service actually delivered, rather than an idealized version of the service (8).

Bitner (3) argues that the key to understanding consumers' service needs is through monitor-

ing service encounters. Ziethaml, Parasuraman, and Berry (11) have developed what is known as the Servqual scale, a way in which to evaluate consumers' expectations, and cross-reference them with the perceptions consumers had of the service. Servqual evaluates multiple-items, and can be used across a broad spectrum services (11). Servqual evaluates five main service quality dimensions: tangibles, reliability, responsiveness, assurance, and empathy. From these five qualities Parasuraman, Berry and Ziethaml (8) argue that a service company can be evaluated properly, the consumers' expectations and perceptions can be understood and a company can change accordingly.

## RESEARCH METHODS

The sample population studied were guests of the Pine Point Resort, a sport fishing resort in Northwestern Ontario. Management of the resort cooperated by agreeing to mail questionnaires to 60 of their guests who had visited their resort within the last year. Data was collected in the fall of 1997, involving both residents of Canada and the United States. A response rate of 50% was achieved.

The survey instrument used was the Servqual scale, developed by Ziethaml, Parasuraman, and Berry (11). Five different variables were tested across two different factors. The five different variables tested were: (1) tangibles, (2) reliability, (3) responsiveness, (4) assurance, and (5) empathy. The first factor evaluated was the customers' expectations of the service. The second factor evaluated was what the customer actually received while attending the sports fishing resort. The five variables were tested by a ranking scheme, whereby respondents ranked what type of service they expect to receive, and then ranked what type of service they actually received.

The analysis followed that of the designers of the Servqual scale: a comparison of the expected services that customers hope to receive to that of the experiences customers actually received at the sport fishing resort. This was done by using 22 questions dealing with expectations, paired with 22 questions dealing with services received. The statistical analysis was done on the SPSS program, and used the Wilcoxon Matched-Paired-Signed-Ranks Test. The questions concerning expected services, were matched by using identical words to those questions concerning actual services. Each pair of questions was analysed in order to see if there were any relevant correlations between expected services, and services received. The significance level indicates whether or not there is a difference between the services expected and the services received.

## RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

### Tangibles

Tangibles within the service industry include, the physical evidence of the service, the facilities, appearance of personnel, tools or equipment used, and other customer within the facility (8). Tangibles, for the Pine Point Resort, was the area in which the most significant results were detected. It was found that respondents felt that the tangibles of the resort were better than what they had originally perceived ( $p = 0.000$ ). Areas within the tangible group included the appearance of the facilities, staff, and material associated with the resort. Three out of the four areas examined of tangibles were all found to exceed the customers' expectations (Table 1). Respondents found the sport fishing resort more appealing than what they expected was what they received. There are two possible reasons for the differences, (1) the way the resort portrays

their facilities, or (2) the manner in which people perceive any sport fishing resort.

If Pine Point Resort displays the resort within their literature, advertising and other forms of marketing as place without modern looking facilities, or neat appearing employees, then the customers are not expecting a high level of tangible attributes. Once arriving at Pine Point Resort, they are surprised to find that their expectations of the resort are much different from what they are receiving. Pine Point may indeed have modern looking equipment, or neat employees, however they do not convey this to the public when advertising and therefore the guests are not expecting these types of tangibles.

When people think of sport fishing resorts, the idea of modern looking equipment or neat employees may not be extremely important to them, this in turn means a low ranking within the survey scale, for tangibles. Once arriving at Pine Point they may find that the facilities are modern looking, and the employees are neat, however this is not what they expected. This could be either a let down to the customer as they were expecting a “rustic” experience, or it may be pleasing as they feel they no longer have to “rough it” out in the woods.

Pine Point Resort should further pursue an understanding of their customers’ expectation of tangibles, in order to accurately market their facilities. One way is to simply ask the customers, whether or not the modern looking equipment appeals to them, or whether the equipment detracts from the experience. This information could then help Pine Point decide whether or not marketing this area would be beneficial to meeting their customers’ expectations, or if the area of tangibles should not be included in their marketing.

## **Reliability**

Reliability involves consistency within the company, both performance and dependability (9). Very little difference between what was expected and what was received, except in one particular area, was found in the analysis of the reliability component of service (Table 2). The area that showed a difference between the expected and received was within Pine Point’s ability to keep promises. Respondents felt that the promises, either implied or stated by Pine Point Resort were not kept as often as they thought they could be. The explanation for this is, that at some time, either before, during or after the experience the respondents had something promised, or perceived that something was promised to them, that was never fulfilled. It does not mean that many promises were broken by Pine Point Resort employees, nonetheless it does mean that overall at some point a promise was broken, which is an event that customers remember and may affect the possibility of a return visit.

Although, the remaining four questions within the reliability component of service did not show a significant difference, there are still elements that need to be discussed. It was found that overall people’s expectations of employees interest in solving problems was greater than what they received. There was not a substantial difference, however there was enough difference that Pine Point Resort should examine the way in which they solve problems within their organization. Pine Point’s ability to perform services when promised right the first time, as well as their ability to keep error-free records, exceeded the expectations of the respondents. This suggests that Pine Point has been managing their services properly in these three areas, Pine Point should continue managing these areas the same way they have done in the past, and the cus

tomers' expectations will continue to be exceeded.

### **Responsiveness**

Responsiveness is the willingness and readiness of employees to provide service (9). Within this study Pine Point was seen to be quite responsive to their customers' needs, and provided the appropriate services for responsiveness. The four questions examining responsiveness were, telling the customers when services will be performed, the speed at which these services were performed, the willingness to help customers and how well they responded to customers individually, all showed no significant difference between the expected and received (Table 3). There were differences noted between the average answers within these questions. These differences although not extremely large, should be dealt with, in order to maintain a good service reputation. Three of the four questions had higher expectance rating than what was actually received. Pine Points ability to inform customers of when services will be performed, the promptness of the service and their willingness to help customers, all showed higher expectance ratings than the services actually received. This again demonstrates that Pine Point should adjust the way these services are delivered, or how they go about marketing these services. The ideal situation is for customers expectations to match the services delivered, eliminating the element of surprises or a possible disappointment.

Overall the respondents' expectations were slightly higher than the services received. This does not reflect poorly on Pine Point Resort, for the difference between the expected and received responsiveness is very minor.

Responsiveness is very important within a service oriented business, as customers do not

want to spend their time on a vacation waiting for a service to be performed. Overall the researchers found that responsiveness was very important to the sports fishermen, and Pine Point ability to be responsive was very close to matching those needs.

### **Assurance**

Assurance of service delivery is the knowledge and courtesy of employees, along with their ability to convey trust and confidence (9). According to the respondents' assurance is something Pine Point performs well, with very little deviation between what was expected and what was received at the sport fishing resort (Table 4). Assurance deals with how safe and confident the customers feel before during and after their visit at Pine Point, as well as the knowledge of the employees. This feeling of safety in a resort, reflects a great deal on how the business is run overall. Safety is not evaluated on one particular instance, but rather on the whole experience of the visit. Part of this experience may transpire prior to visiting a sports resort, whether was a money transaction, or an employee returning a telephone enquiry. While attending a resort assurance includes, the overall safety of the experience, and how comfortable one felt when dealing with employees. Assurance also takes place after the experience, whether it is returning a deposit on time, or simply calling to ensure that the trip taken was to their liking.

There were four questions that evaluated the assurance component of service, and only one had a negative result. Pine Points employees' knowledge in answering questions was seen as having a higher expected rating than what was actually delivered. The difference between the two is very small. However, every aspect must be considered, for small differences if not attended to may result in large problems later. Assurance is extremely important within a

sports tourism activity, as there are many potentially dangerous situations. Customers need to feel safe, and be able to trust employees to handle any problem that arises, if this trust is not in place people will not partake in the activities offered by a company. Pine Point did very well in providing this assurance to their customers, which should ensure additional visits from previous customers.

### **Empathy**

Empathy is the caring and individualized attention provided to customers (9). There were no significant differences found between the expected services and the services actually received for empathy at Pine Point Resort (Table 5). Notwithstanding, there are some components of this variable that do require attention, and evaluation for further use. The individual attention provided by Pine Point's employees exceeded the respondents' original expectations, which is an important factor. Each customer is different, and expects different amounts of service, by providing individual attention to each customer it then becomes easier to meet all of the customers' needs. Individual attention is something that is becoming very rare within the service industry, having been replaced with service to the masses. This approach of providing service to the masses may seem more economical, however this may be the exact opposite. By providing a customer with individual attention, there is a greater possibility of that customer returning and spending more money. A company initially may make greater amounts of money providing service to the masses, however have little chance of return business. By delivering individual attention to the customer, there is a greater likelihood of that person returning, and possibly with more people than the year before. In the long run it seems providing individual attention will be more economical than providing service to the masses.

Apart from providing individual attention at a high level, Pine Point has been able to match perfectly the customers' need for personal attention ( $p = 1.000$ ). This question takes individual attention one step further, with Pine Point having the ability to provide a personal touch. The respondents felt that Pine Point offered excellent personal attention, and that their needs were met perfectly.

Of the final three questions examining empathy, all showed slight discrepancies between the expected and the received services. The three questions investigated were, the operating hours, the best interests of the customers and Pine Point's ability to understand the specific needs of the customer. All three of these questions had higher expectancy rates, than the services that were actually received. One question in particular, Pine Point's ability to understand the specific needs of the customer was higher in the expected service, compared to the one received. This suggests that although Pine Point provides excellent individual, and personal attention, they need to further understand exactly what customers want when attending their facility. It is very difficult to provide the appropriate service to a customer, if the customers' needs are not understood. In order to further understand the needs of the customers, Pine Point must conduct their own study focussing on what a customer hopes to receive while visiting their facility. Once understood Pine Point can proceed in providing individual and personal attention to suit the needs of its customers.

### **Limitations of the Study**

The limitations of the study include two factors, the size of the sample population and the survey instrument used. The sample population for this study was 31, which is a relatively small sample in which to draw large conclusions. Unfortunately due to budgetary con-

straints, and the time allotted to conduct this study, the size of the sample population was unavoidable. This study is also limited to the Servqual scale, one that was designed to evaluate service, however does not necessarily cover all aspects. It has been noted that the Servqual scale is one-dimensional, and does not necessarily cover all the areas concerned with service delivery (4). The survey instrument contained 44 questions, 22 for the expected service, and 22 questions using the same words for the services received. If additional services were provided, or should be provided by Pine Point Resort, they were not evaluated. This study is limited to the questions that were asked, and does not provide any information on other areas that may call for evaluation.

## CONCLUSION

This study can be used in a variety of ways, and has many possible implications. The first implication is for use by Pine Point Resort, they will be able to evaluate, based on the findings in this study, exactly what may need to be changed and what can remain the same. Pine Point will be able to use this study as a marketing tool, as they will now better understand their customers and can direct their marketing based on the information provided within this study. An additional use for this study is for other sport fishing resorts that wish to understand their customers better. This study provides a framework for different sport fishing resorts wishing to conduct their own test and analyse the results for themselves.

This study is not limited strictly to the sport fishing tourism industry, and could very easily be used in any tourism oriented industry.

Credibility is achieved by having the customers best interests at heart, this is shown through the companies honesty, believability, and trustworthiness (9). Pine Point Resort should gain credibility in the eyes of their customers by allowing this study to be undertaken Pine Point has shown the concern for the well being of their business as well as their customers. This study can be displayed for the customers to read and understand that Pine Point does take interest in their customers needs and wants. The study clearly displays where adjustments should be made within the organization, and how these adjustments can be made. It is not often that a company will allow this sort of study to take place, in fear of discovering they have business lacking vital components. Pine Point has shown dedication to their customers and business, and by taking part in this study can only improve their business further.

Sports tourism requires extremely high levels of service, as that is the nature of the business. The ability of an organization to provide the appropriate services will determine whether it succeeds or if it will fail. Because sports tourism is an emerging field within the tourism industry, expectations from consumers is not well understood. Those destinations and service providers that identify and meet the sport tourists' expectations will gain the competitive advantage over their counterparts.

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**TABLE 1****TANGIBLES: COMPARISON BETWEEN EXPECTED AND RECEIVED**

Tangibles	Expected		Received		Wilcoxon Matched - Pairs Test		ANOVA of Group Empathy	
	Mean	Std. Dev.	Mean	Std. Dev.	Z - Value	2 - Tailed P	Expected	Received
Will have modern looking equipment	5.516	1.26	6.226	0.76	-2.551	0.011	5.612	6.048
Visually appealing	5.774	1.2	5.968	0.95	-0.746	0.456		
Employees neat appearing	5.484	1.61	5.7	1.09	-1.802	0.072		
Literature appealing	5.677	1.22	6.226	0.72	-2.294	0.022		
							2 - Tailed P = .000	

n = 31

**TABLE 2****RELIABILITY: COMPARISON BETWEEN EXPECTED AND RECEIVED**

Reliability	Expected		Received		Wilcoxon Matched - Pairs Test		ANOVA of Group Empathy	
	Mean	Std. Dev.	Mean	Std. Dev.	Z - Value	2 - Tailed P	Expected	Received
Promises are Kept	6.58	0.56	6.1	1.11	-2.22	0.027	6.342	6.219
Interest in Solving Problems	6.68	0.54	6.19	1.38	-1.64	0.101		
Perform Services Right the First Time	6.1	0.94	6.16	1	-0.61	0.539		
Performed Services when Promised	6.32	0.87	6.39	0.72	-0.36	0.723		
Has Error Free Records	6.1	1.11	6.36	0.86	-0.82	0.415		
							2 - Tailed P = .400	

n = 31

**TABLE 3****RESPONSIVENESS: COMPARISON BETWEEN EXPECTED AND RECEIVED**

Responsiveness	Expected		Received		Wilcoxon Matched - Pairs Test		ANOVA of Group Empathy	
	Mean	Std. Dev.	Mean	Std. Dev.	Z - Value	2 - Tailed P	Expected	Received
Tells You When Services Will Be Performed	6	1	5.81	1.38	-0.4	0.638	6.129	6
Gives Prompt Service	6.13	0.81	5.94	1.18	-0.7	0.481		
Willing To Help Customers	6.48	0.68	6.39	1.12	-0.2	0.868		
Responds To You	5.65	1.33	5.87	1.15	-0.8	0.448		
							2 - Tailed P = .545	

n = 31

**TABLE 4****ASSURANCE: COMPARISON BETWEEN EXPECTED AND RECEIVED**

Assurance	Expected		Received		Wilcoxon Matched - Pairs Test		ANOVA of Group Empathy	
	Mean	Std. Dev.	Mean	Std. Dev.	Z - Value	2 - Tailed P	Expected	Received
Instills Confidence In You	6.23	0.88	6.26	1.06	-0.5	0.64	6.241	6.345
Safety in The Transactions	6.32	0.83	6.61	0.72	-1.7	0.089		
Courteous With Customers	6.32	0.83	6.84	0.85	-0.8	0.399		
Knowledge To Answer Questions	6.1	0.94	6.07	1.15	-0.1	0.909		
							2 - Tailed P = .142	

n = 31

**TABLE 5****EMPATHY: COMPARISON BETWEEN EXPECTED AND RECEIVED**

Empathy	Expected		Received		Wilcoxon Matched - Pairs Test		ANOVA of Group Empathy	
	Mean	Std. Dev.	Mean	Std. Dev.	Z - Value	2 - Tailed P	Expected	Received
Individual Attention	5.87	1	6.065	1.263	-1.3	0.182	5.98	5.935
Convenient Operating Hours	5.9	1	5.806	1.138	-0.5	0.637		
Personal Attention	5.84	1.2	5.839	1.319	0	1		
Best Interest at Heart	6.26	.08	6	1.095	-1.1	0.263		
Understand Specific Needs of Customers	6.9	0.9	5.968	1.14	-0.4	0.691		
							2 - Tailed P = .716	

n = 31