Community Expectations and Perceptions of Municipal Service Delivery: A Case Study in a South African Municipality

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Abstract

The new South Africa came into being in 1994 and has been a democracy for twenty years in 2014. The incoming government faced a significant task of transformation, requiring an effective public service capability. The lack of service delivery by South African municipalities has received considerable attention in recent years including the public expression of dissatisfaction with service delivery failure becoming an almost daily occurrence. According to the South African Constitution, the mandate of a municipality is to ensure service deliveries through satisfying citizens' basic needs. Therefore, an understanding of customers' expectations and perceptions is vital for any service organisation's success. This study was conducted against the backdrop of the White Paper on Local Government that calls for the provision of services to communities in a sustainable manner. This study sought to determine the community's expectations and perceptions of the quality of service delivery by a South African municipality, in order to present findings and recommendations on the service quality gaps identified, for the benefit of municipalities in general. Based on previous theoretical discussions regarding customer's expectations and perceptions, an empirical study was conducted to identify the most important service quality dimensions, using the SERVQUAL gap score. A quantitative research approach was employed, whereby a structured, self-administered questionnaire was used to gather data on the expectations and perceptions of service quality. A convenience sample of 400 residents of a South African municipality, situated in the Gauteng province, by means of mall-intercept, was taken. The collected data were analysed using paired t-test. The findings indicate negative perceptions of the quality of services delivered by the municipality. This article concludes with recommendations to municipalities and service organisations in general regarding the quality of service delivery.

Keywords: Service quality; SERVQUAL; expectations; perceptions; municipal service delivery

1. Introduction

Following South Africa's first democratic local government elections in 1996, the government had to rethink the manner in which services were being delivered in light of the proposed fiscal, political, social and economic transformations. In the post-apartheid South African, the local government system of the transitional phase needed to mature into a new system of local governance (De Villiers & Kalema, 2005). The White Paper on Local Government (RSA, 1998) states that in order to realise the vision, goals and objectives of the new democracy, an array of institutional and political interventions by government is required. According to the White Paper on Local Government (RSA, 1998), national government, provincial government and local government were established as the three elected spheres of government, each with distinctive functional responsibilities. Hence, in terms of Chapter 4 of the Constitution (1996) (hereafter referred to as the Constitution) national, provincial and local government were established as the three elected spheres of government, each with distinctive functional responsibilities required to function as a single system of cooperative government for the country as a whole. Although transformation has been the defining characteristic of the structures and institutions of all three spheres of government, the process followed different paths for both provincial and local government.

Local government came into being much later than the other two spheres of government, generating new opportunities for a more responsive and efficient government. However, incorporating local government into the system of cooperative governance has proved to be complex. Furthermore, The White Paper on Local Government (RSA, 1998) highlights that the absence of a definite policy on provincial government, generates uncertainty about the role of this sphere in reconstruction and development. As a result, there is intransigence in the relationship between the different spheres of government (Schacter, 2000). In order to facilitate and improve service delivery, there should be a coordinated effort from all spheres of government.

Municipalities are important role players in service delivery and are required by law to find innovative methods to involve communities in all their affairs (Boshoff & Mazibuko, 2008). According to the Constitution, the mandate of a municipality, is to ensure that the service deliveries for which it is responsible satisfy citizens' basic needs, such as water supply, sewerage collection and disposal, refuse removal, electricity and gas supply, health services, roads and storm water drainage, street lighting, and municipal parks and recreation (Boshoff & Mazibuko, 2008). Nealer and Raga (2007) opine that the Constitution is a contract between the South African Government and the citizens of the country, established by the structuring of the three spheres of government legislature and execution of public policies. Therefore, the government is under a moral obligation to identify and address the needs of the country's citizens. Therefore, in order to add value to the respective communities and society as a whole, government needs to determine which services should be addressed through more effective, efficient and economical public administration and management.

The White Paper on Municipal Service Partnerships offers support to the views of the role of municipalities and the case for nationally set standards for municipal service delivery, monitored within a national framework for performance management (Curtis, 1999). From the customers' perspective, expectations of services have shifted upwards, with greater emphasis placed on the quality of service. From a best value perspective, the measurement of service quality is that the public sector should take into account customer expectations and perceptions of services (Robinson, 1999). A regularly used method is the utilisation of gap scores that enable service managers to assess current service quality and quantify the gaps that exist. As such, the service quality dimensions assist in gaining an understanding of the broad areas within which customers have particularly high or low expectations, and in assessing where there may be relatively large service gaps (Wisniewski, 2001).

The emergence of the new South African democracy in 1994 brought with it expectations of equalisation across racial, gender, socio-economic and geographic boundaries, together with fair and just delivery of services, access to basic services and the hope that all citizens would have freedom and dignity (Van der Wal, Pampallis & Bond, 2002). The challenge lies in ensuring that municipalities provide optimal and professional services to the citizens of heterogeneous cultures (Pretorius & Schurink, 2007). Municipalities are the vehicles selected by national government to address the service-delivery challenge and to reduce the apartheid backlog, whilst concurrently raising the level of services delivered (Hemson, 2004). The leadership and governance framework should be manifested through a set of techniques and methods related to effective policy implementation, monitoring and evaluation (Van der Waldt, 2004).

According to Van der Wal et al. (2002), the ultimate aim of any modern government is to create conditions within a country that ensure that every stakeholder enjoys a good quality of life, and that to do so, necessitates that government identifies priorities in relation to formulated objectives, targets, services and strategies. Owing to the recent challenges facing public organisations globally, a new public management system, which focuses more on the business management system used in private sector management, is being adopted (Farnham & Horton, 1996).

Service delivery and service quality, determined by the disparity between the expectations of the community and its perceptions of the service actually delivered (Curry & Sinclair, 2002), can provide an organisation with a lasting competitive advantage (Van der Wal et al., 2002). The quality of services provided by organisations can mean the difference between success and failure. Service quality, customer satisfaction and customer value have become the main concerns in service organisations and, as a result, many organisations are paying more attention to improving service delivery and service quality (Wang, Hing-Po & Yung, 2004).

The primary aim of the study reported on in this article was to determine the residents' expectations and perceptions of the quality of municipal services delivered by a South African municipality, situated in the Gauteng province, in order to identify potential service quality gaps.

The following research questions are addressed in this article: (1) What are the residents' expectations and perceptions of the quality of service delivery by a municipality? (2) What service quality gaps exist in municipal services delivery?

2. Literature Review

2.1 Services marketing

Services contribute to over 80 percent of gross domestic product (GDP) in developed countries, and 50 percent in developing countries (Sayeda, Rajendran & Lokachari, 2010). The service industry is both a major employer and an important source of income in developed economies (Piercy & Rich, 2009). Kotler (2003:97) defines a service as "any act or performance that one party can offer to another that is essentially intangible and does not result in the ownership of anything". Palmer (2011) echoes this, indicating that a service is a product offering in the form of a performance, deed or act that provides want-satisfaction. According to Stevensson (2004), the interaction between the service provider and the customer produces, distributes and consumes services. Theron, Bothma and Du Toit (2003) concur, stating that services, in contrast to products, involve deeds, processes and performances. Owing to the nature and characteristics of services, the concept of service quality is complex and difficult to measure, which has an impact on service quality delivery (Woodruffe, 1995).

Various researchers have identified four generic key characteristics that distinguish a service from a product in the marketing context, namely intangibility, inseparability, heterogeneity and perishability (Du Plessis, Rousseau & Blem, 1995; Theron et al., 2003; Woodruffe 1995). Intangibility refers to something that cannot be seen, touched or evaluated before receipt thereof. The five senses perceive only the results of a service and not the service itself. Service levels are often uncertain and the benefits frequently unknown (Theron et al., 2003). The inseparability characteristic of services refers to the fact that, generally, the production and consumption of a service occurs concurrently (Kotler, 2003). Fisk, Brown and Bitner (1993) indicate that a customer receiving a service is directly involved in the service delivery process and may therefore influence that process. According to Kotler (2003), the heterogeneity characteristic of services reflects how the quality of services varies, depending on when and where they are provided and by whom. Perishability, the fourth service characteristic highlighted, alludes to the fact that services exist in real time, which means that they cannot be stored (Palmer, 2011). These characteristics create various challenges for service marketers and require a unique marketing approach (Boshoff & Du Plessis, 2009).

2.2 Service quality

Delivering quality service is essential for the success and survival of service organisations (Noone & Namasivayam, 2010). In a turbulent and competitive global business environment, organisations face considerable pressure to meet or exceed customer expectations by delivering services that are of the highest quality (Dorsch, Yasin & Czuchry, 1997). Service quality is a critical determinant for the success of an organisation in a competitive environment, where any decline in customer satisfaction due to poor service quality should be a matter of concern. Customers have high service expectations and are aware of rising standards in service, prompted by competitive trends in the business environment (Frost & Kumar, 2000). Service quality is a major area of attention for practitioners, managers and researchers because of its strong impact on business performance, costs, customer satisfaction, customer loyalty and profitability (Seth & Deshmukh, 2005). Earlier research by Parasuraman, Zeithaml and Berry (1985) proposed that service quality is a function of the difference between expectations and performances along the quality dimensions. Parasuraman, Zeithaml and Berry (1988) later described service quality as a form of attitude-related satisfaction that results from the comparison of expectations with performance. Zeithaml et al. (2008) state that customers do not perceive service quality in a uni-dimensional way but rather judge quality based on multiple factors relevant to the particular context. The dimensions of service quality have been identified through the pioneering research of Parasuraman et al. (1985) and comprise five dimensions, namely tangibility, reliability, responsiveness, assurance and empathy.

Tangibility is the appearance of physical facilities, equipment, personnel and communication materials (Santos, 2002). Tangibility provides physical representations or images of the service that customers, particularly new customers, will use to evaluate quality. Service organisations often use tangibles to enhance their image, provide continuity and signal quality to customers. The reliability dimension of service quality refers to the ability of service organisations to perform the promised service dependably and accurately, and thus reflects the consistency and dependability of an organisation's performance (Rodriguez, Vazquez Burguete, Vaughan & Edwards, 2011). Wilson, Zeithaml, Bitner and Gremler (2008) opine that reliability means that the organisation delivers on its promises about service delivery, service provision and problem resolution.

Responsiveness is the willingness to help customers and to provide prompt service (Jamal & Anastasiadou, 2009). The organisation must view the process of service delivery and the handling of requests from the customer's point of view

rather than from the organisation's point of view (Wilson et al., 2008). The assurance dimension of service quality addresses the competence of the organisation, the courtesy it extends to its customers and the security of its operations (Bateson & Hoffman, 2011). Jamal and Anastasiadou (2009) define assurance as employees' knowledge and courtesy, and the ability of the organisation and its employees to inspire trust and confidence. Jamal and Anastasiadou (2009) define empathy as the caring and individualised attention that the organisation provides its customers. Bateson and Hoffman (2011) explain that empathy is the ability to experience another's feelings as one's own. According to Wilson et al. (2008), the essence of empathy is conveying, through personalised or customised service, that the customers are unique and special and that their needs are understood.

2.3 SERVQUAL model

The SERVQUAL model, developed by Parasuraman et al. (1985), is a well-known instrument used by many researchers in the services marketing field measuring consumers' expectations and perceptions of service quality (Grönroos, 2000; Boshoff & du Plessis, 2009; Palmer 2011). The model consists of 22 expectation- and performance-based statements, used to depict the five dimensions of service quality (Zeithaml, Parasuraman & Berry, 1990). The SERVQUAL methodology identifies five gaps where there may be shortfall between expectations and perceptions of actual service delivery (Palmer, 2011). The model suggests that the greater the distance between the two variables where performance supersedes expectations, the greater the service quality gap (Crick & Spencer, 2011).

3. Methodology

This study adopted a quantitative approach to determine residents' expectations and perceptions of service quality delivery by a South African municipality.

3.1 Sampling method

For the purpose of this study, the target population was defined as individuals residing in a municipal boundary, located in the Gauteng Province. The sampling frame selected comprised a list of the ten municipalities in the Gauteng Province in South Africa. Using a judgement sampling method, this sampling frame was narrowed down to one municipality and two pay points in that selected municipality. The reason for selecting the Gauteng province was due its geographical location and the fact that it is the most populous province, comprising 24 percent of the total South African population (Muller, 2014). The two selected pay points where chosen because, at the time of the study, they were the largest pay points serving the residents of the chosen municipality. A non-probability convenience sample of 400 residents was used to conduct this study. Trained fieldworkers, using a mall-intercept approach, distributed questionnaires to residents at the two selected pay points.

3.2 Measurement instrument and data collection procedures

The mall-intercept survey method was applied to collect the data in this study. A structured, self-administered questionnaire was employed to gather the required data. In order to elicit information on community expectations and perceptions of the quality of municipal service delivery, the questionnaire included the standardised SERVQUAL scale, developed and validated by Parasuraman et al., (1985). The SERVQUAL scale, which is in two parts – service expectations and perceptions of actual service delivery quality - comprises five dimensions, namely tangibility (4 items), reliability (5 items), responsiveness (4 items), assurance (4 items) and empathy (5 items). Responses were measured on a five-point Likert scale, where 1 = strongly agree, 2 = agree, 3 = neither agree nor disagree, 4 = disagree and 5 = strongly disagree. In addition, the questionnaire included a section designed to gather the participants' demographic information and a cover letter outlining the purpose of the study.

The questionnaire was piloted on a convenience sample of 54 residents, residing in a municipal boundary outside that of the sampling frame. The results of the pilot test were considered in finalising of the questionnaire. For the pilot, Cronbach alpha values of 0.860 were computed on the customer expectations scale and 0.941 for the customer perceptions scale, both of which exceeded the recommended level of being above 0.600, thereby indicating reliability (Malhotra, 2010). The average inter-item correlation values of 0.258 were recorded on the customer expectations scale and 0.432 on the customer perceptions scale. This suggests convergent and discriminant validity, as both of these values fell within the recommended range of 0.15 to 0.50 (Clark & Watson, 1995).

Permission to carry out the survey was obtained from the municipal manager of the selected municipality. Thereafter, using the mall-intercept approach, the self-administered questionnaire was distributed with the assistance of two trained fieldworkers at the two selected pay points through the course of one week. The participants were informed that participation was strictly on a voluntary basis.

4. Results

Of the 400 questionnaires distributed, 367 questionnaires were returned completed, which translates into a response rate of 92 percent. The sample included a greater number of male than female participants. The majority of the participants were African. Concerning the participants' age, the majority of the participants indicated being between 40 and 49 years of age, followed by those who indicated being between 30 and 39 years of age. The majority of the participants indicated that they had been staying in their residence for the past 11 to 20 years, closely followed by those who indicated residing in their residence for the past 6 to 10 years. The demographic information of the sample's participants is presented in Table 1.

Table 1. Sample description

Gender	Percent (%)	Race	Percent (%)	Age	Percent (%)	Occupancy years	Percent (%)
Male	55	White	16	20-29	15	0-5	9
Female	45	African	76	30-39	29	6-10	39
		Coloured	7	40-49	39	11-20	37
		Asian	1	50-59	16	20+	15
				60+	1		

In the main survey, a Cronbach alpha value of 0.912 was computed on the customer expectations scale and an alpha value of 0.884 on the customer perceptions scale. The Cronbach alpha values for the individual constructs ranged between 0.657 and 0.912. With regard to content validity, the customer expectations scale and the customer perceptions scale, as well as the five dimensions within each, all scored average inter-item correlation values within the recommended range of 0.15 to 0.50. Although the average inter-item correlation for the responsiveness dimension in the customer expectations scale and the tangibility dimension in the customer perceptions scale exceeded the recommended 0.50 level, it was only by a marginal amount. Table 2 shows the reliability and validity measures for the customer expectations and perceptions and for each of the five dimensions.

Table 2. Customers' expectations and perceptions

Dimension	Number of items	Customer expectations		Customer perceptions	
		Cronbach alpha	Inter-item correlation	Cronbach alpha	Inter-item correlation
Tangibility	4	0.787	0.485	0.863	0.612
Reliability	5	0.769	0.402	0.820	0.478
Responsiveness	4	0.818	0.535	0.594	0.273
Assurance	4	0.728	0.402	0.542	0.228
Empathy	5	0.774	0.407	0.657	0.276
Overall score	22	0.912	0.320	0.884	0.245

Means below 2 were returned on all five dimensions of the customer expectations scale (a low score indicates high customer service expectations) and means above 4 were returned on all five dimensions of the customer perceptions scale (a high score indicates low customer perceptions of the quality of service delivery). This suggests that whilst the residents of this municipality had high expectations of quality service delivery, their perceptions of the quality of the municipality's actual service delivery to be low. By implication, this infers that there are gaps in the service delivery of this municipality that need to be addressed.

A paired sample t-test was performed in order to test whether the differences between customers' service expectations of this municipality and their perceptions of the actual service delivery were significant. The significance level was set at the conventional 5 percent level. The means, standard deviations (SD), gap means, D-values and p-values are given in Table 3.

Table 3: Paired sample t-test

Service quality dimensions	Expectations means (SD)	Perceptions means (SD)	Gap means (perception – expectation)	D-values	P-values
Tangibility	1.78 (0.53)	4.20 (0.69)	2.42	-49.850	0.000*
Modern looking equipment	1.55 (0.75)	3.90 (0.88)	2.35	-28.305	0.000*
Attractiveness of the physical facility	1.93 (0.36)	4.26 (0.83)	2.33	-35.776	0.000*
Neatness of personnel's appearance	1.84 (0.67)	4.30 (0.79)	2.46	-39.545	0.000*
Visually appealing promotional materials	1.81 (0.65)	4.33 (0.83)	2.52	-41.923	0.000*
Reliability	1.70 (0.58)	4.39 (0.57)	2.69	-66.399	0.000*
Provide services as promised	1.72 (0.69)	4.35 (0.76)	2.63	-43.536	0.000*
Sincere interest in solving problems	1.72 (0.72)	4.38 (0.80)	2.66	-43.023	0.000*
Services performed right the first time	1.70 (0.72)	4.38 (0.71)	2.68	-42.645	0.000*
Services delivered timeously	1.72 (0.74)	4.38 (0.71)	2.66	-41.559	0.000*
Error-free records	1.64 (0.78)	4.44 (0.73)	2.80	-40.970	0.000*
Responsiveness	1.77 (0.57)	4.35 (0.47)	2.58	-63.669	0.000*
Inform customers when services will be performed	1.53 (0.79)	4.39 (0.76)	2.86	-41.898	0.000*
Service promptly delivered	1.92 (0.66)	4.42 (0.74)	2.50	-34.524	0.000*
Willingness to help customers	1.81 (0.68)	4.23 (0.77)	2.42	-43.935	0.000*
Never be too busy to respond to requests	1.82 (0.72)	4.36 (0.65)	2.54	-45.425	0.000*
Assurance	1.71 (0.52)	4.47 (0.39)	2.76	-78.379	0.000*
Personnel's behaviour instils confidence	1.72 (0.70)	4.38 (0.59)	2.66	-49.867	0.000*
Feeling secure with transactions	1.74 (0.73)	4.49 (0.59)	2.75	-51.840	0.000*
Personnel are consistently polite	1.69 (0.67)	4.49 (0.59)	2.80	-50.928	0.000*
Personnel are knowledgeable	1.70 (0.71)	4.47 (0.61)	2.77	-50.099	0.000*
Empathy	1.67 (0.52)	4.47 (0.42)	2.80	-74.376	0.000*
Give individual attention	1.69 (0.68)	4.43 (0.62)	2.74	-49.686	0.000*
Convenient operating hours	1.69 (0.74)	4.48 (0.63)	2.79	-47.043	0.000*
Give personal attention	1.69 (0.70)	4.43 (0.68)	2.74	-48.364	0.000*
Have the customers' best interests at heart	1.67 (0.72)	4.46 (0.63)	2.79	-52.731	0.000*
Personnel understand customers' specific needs	1.61 (0.70)	4.46 (0.64)	2.85	-54.487	0.000*
*Significant at the 0.05 level					

As is evident from Table 3, the difference between customers' expectations and was statistically significant for each of the five dimensions of service quality. These negative gaps indicate that the perceived service quality provided by this municipality does not meet the customers' expectations. Furthermore, for each of the 22 statements there is evidence that the quality of service falls short of the customers' expectations, thereby inferring dissatisfaction with the services provided. The largest gap scores were recorded on the dimensions pertaining to empathy (mean = 2.80), assurance (mean = 2.76) and reliability (mean = 2. 69). This suggests that there is an urgent need for this municipality to address the way in which its front-office staff members deal with customers and how their back-office staff members deliver services.

5. Discussion

This study investigated customers' expectations and perceptions of the quality of municipal services delivered by a South African municipality. In order to measure the difference between customers' expectations and perceptions, this study used the SERVQUAL instrument. The SERVQUAL gap score proved useful for assessing levels of service quality, where gap analysis was applied to identify service shortfalls of municipal services. The results in this study provide valuable insights into the overall current status on municipal service delivery. This study indicates customer dissatisfaction of municipal service delivery in all five areas of service quality, namely tangibility, reliability, responsiveness, assurance and empathy, with the most marked dissatisfaction occurring on the dimensions of empathy, assurance and reliability.

The first two dimensions of empathy and assurance typically relate to the way in which front office staff members engage with customers. The evidence in the sample suggests that the front office personnel at this municipality do not provide caring and individualised attention to customers. Moreover, they appear to come across as being incompetent at their jobs. In order to address this problem, a training programme needs to be implemented that comprises two components. The first component of the training programme should focus on teaching staff members how to engage with

members of the public, and be attentive and polite to customers. The second component of the programme should focus on equipping the staff members with the necessary knowledge and skills required to carry out their duties in a competent manner. Each new staff member should be sent on such training programmes and existing staff members should be sent on periodical refresher courses. In addition, it is advised that an incentive programme, such as staff member of the month, be implemented to reinforce the skills gained from the training programme. Such initiatives may also facilitate improving the responsiveness of staff members.

This study also found that there was a large gap in expectations and perceptions on the dimension of reliability, which pertains to the performance of service in an accurate and dependable manner. The cause of this gap requires further investigation by the municipality. While the fault may lie with the back office personnel, it may also be a systems problem, or even a combination of both. If it is a personnel problem, once again training is advised. It may also be necessary to recruit suitable qualified individuals to manage the systems and processes necessary to ensure reliable service delivery. If a systems problem is suspected then an ergonomist consultant needs to be hired. In addition, attention should be given to improving the collaboration, co-ordination and co-operation between departments, integrating planning processes between departments and providing leadership training for the management team. Investment in modern computer systems may also help in addressing this problem.

Clearly, there is a problem on each of the five dimensions of service quality at this municipality, with the most pressing issues being empathy, assurance and reliability. More often than not, poor management is at the heart of service delivery problems and a more aggressive strategy that would address all five dimensions would be to evaluate the management structure of the municipality. This would entail forcing managers to reapply for their positions as a way of weeding out apathetic and incompetent managers, implementing five-year performance-based contracts for all managerial positions and having strict measures in place to ensure that managerial bonuses are awarded strictly on a quantified performance basis.

The study offers insights into customers' expectations and perceptions of the quality of municipal service delivery, but certain limitations should be noted. Although the sample included residents from different genders, ages and years of occupancy, it was a convenience sample. As such, caution should be exercised in generalising the findings of the target population. Future research may be undertaken to complement the findings of this study by developing the service delivery model that municipalities can employ to deliver the required services. Furthermore, owing to this study only including one municipality, future research should be expanded to include more municipality boundaries throughout South Africa.

6. Conclusion

Municipalities in South Africa exist primarily for improving the welfare of the local communities they serve and therefore should be aware of their customers' expectations and perceptions of service quality, as evaluated in this study. Local government in South Africa is undividable from the events that have shaped the South African socio-economic and political landscape. The South African 1996 Constitution stipulates that all spheres of government are responsible for ensuring the delivery of basic services to all South Africans. Local authorities particularly face a massive task, as there is a huge backlog in access to basic services in South Africa. Municipalities in South Africa are important role players in service delivery and are required by law to find innovative methods to involve communities in all their affairs. Although municipalities face many challenges concerning service delivery, one of the major concerns among South Africans is slow service delivery by municipalities. Many municipalities find it challenging to find ways to accomplish their requirement to deliver quality services to their communities.

This study shows a significant difference between customers' expectations and perceptions of the municipal service quality delivered. Driven by these differences, municipalities are increasingly required to redefine their role, strengthen their customer focus as the core value of the organisation and build integrated service models based on meeting customer needs more efficiently and effectively. The municipality should ensure the encouragement of active participation by the community on the municipal decision-making processes, from strategy formulation and design, through to execution.

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