

## 9.16: The Gap Model of Service Quality

### Learning Objectives

By the end of this section, you will be able to

- Describe the Gap Model of Service Quality.
- List and describe the dimensions of service quality.

### Dimensions of Service Quality

While we're still on the subject of customer satisfaction, let's take a look at still another model that aids marketers in better understanding customer satisfaction: the Gap Model of Service Quality (sometimes also known as the Customer Service Gap Model or the Five-Gap Model), first proposed in 1985. The importance of this model is that it demonstrates that customer satisfaction is essentially a function of perception. In other words, if the service provided meets or exceeds customers' expectations, they will be satisfied; if not, they will be dissatisfied, likely as a result of one of the customer service gaps presented below (Indeed Editorial Team, 2023).

According to the model (see Figure 9.11.11), there are five major gaps or potential inconsistencies organizations encounter in seeking to meet customers' expectations of the customer experience (Indeed Editorial Team, 2023).

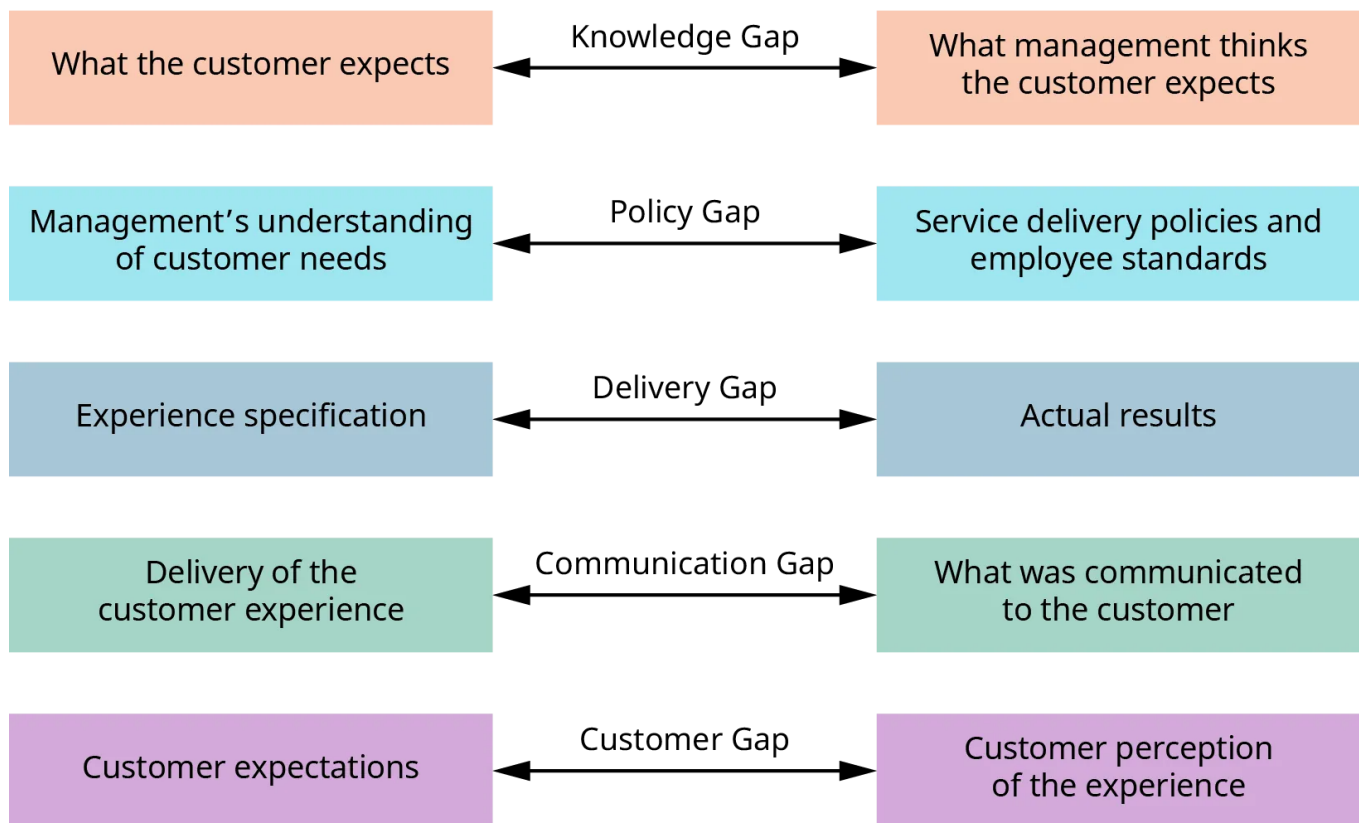


Figure 9.11.11 Gap Model of Service Quality (CC BY 4.0; Rice University & OpenStax)

The gaps are:

- Gap 1—knowledge gap: the difference between customer expectations and what managers *think* they expect
- Gap 2—policy gap: the difference between management's understanding of the customer's needs and how they translate that understanding into service delivery policies and standards for employees
- Gap 3—delivery gap: the difference between the experience specification and the actual results of the service
- Gap 4—communication gap: the difference between the delivery of the customer experience and what is communicated to the customer

- Gap 5—customer gap: the difference between the customer’s expectations of the service or experience and their perception of the experience

Let’s look at each of these gaps in more detail.

### Gap 1: The Knowledge Gap

The knowledge gap is the difference between what customers expect and what the company *thinks* they expect (Indeed Editorial Team, 2023). The bottom line is that the company doesn’t know exactly what customers want. This could be due to various factors—lack of communication between frontline employees and management, inadequate market research, or simply a failure to listen to customer feedback, including complaints. For example, a hotel manager may think that guests want a hot breakfast instead of a continental breakfast, but the reality is that guests are more concerned with the cleanliness of their rooms or the speed of the Internet service at the hotel than they are with breakfast.

### Gap 2: The Policy Gap

The policy gap reflects the difference between management’s perception of the customer’s needs and the translation of that understanding into its service delivery policies and standards. Typically, management accurately understands what the customer wants, but performance standards haven’t been established to ensure that the appropriate employee behaviors are displayed (Indeed Editorial Team, 2023). Using the hotel example again, assume that several customers have complained that the phone rings innumerable times before it is answered. Management wants to address this issue, so it establishes a policy that phones must be answered “quickly.” What’s your interpretation of the word *quickly*—two rings, four rings, six rings? Specificity here is the key.

### Gap 3: The Delivery Gap

The delivery gap is the difference between service standards and policies and the actual delivery of the service. In this situation, frontline service workers *know* how to delight the customer; they simply aren’t doing it. For instance, management may have established a policy that the front desk phones get answered on or before the second ring, but the front desk employees allow phones to ring much longer before answering. This gap may arise from improper training, lack of capability on the part of employees, unwillingness to meet the established service standards, or staff shortages.

Southwest Airlines is a great example of this. According to its website, the company’s mission is “dedication to the highest quality of Customer Service delivered with a sense of warmth, friendliness, individual pride, and Company Spirit” (Peek, 2024). The company doesn’t “overhype” its service, so there is no delivery gap—the difference between the experience specification and the actual delivery of its service. This is demonstrated by the fact that, compared to other airlines, Southwest has the greatest customer service rating, earning a 33.9 percent excellence rating (Peek, 2024).

### Gap 4: The Communication Gap

If marketers are doing an effective job in terms of their promotion efforts, the customer is likely to be highly influenced by that promotion. The problem now is that the company had better deliver. The communication gap is the difference between the delivery of the service and what is communicated to the customer. In other words, what did the company promise versus what did it deliver?

### Gap 5: The Customer Gap

The customer gap is the difference between the customer’s expectations of the service or experience and their perception of the experience itself. In an ideal world, the customer’s expectations would be nearly identical to their perception, but customer perception is totally subjective and has been shaped by word of mouth, their personal needs, and their own past experiences. The problem is that each individual perceives their world through their own eyes, and everyone perceives reality differently. In other words, while reality is a fixed factor, perception of reality is a variable.

#### Link to Learning: Understanding the Gap Model

Watch this video and learn more about quality of service and the gap model from Jochen Wirtz, a well-known marketing author.



Also check out this article from Indeed about the GAP Model of Service Quality, with examples.

### The RATER Model

In their book *Delivering Quality Service*, researchers Valerie Zeithaml, A. Parasuraman, and Leonard Berry identified five dimensions of service that customers use when evaluating service quality. Their research indicated that these five dimensions result in service excellence and lead to higher customer loyalty. This model is sometimes known as the RATER framework of service quality (Arlen, 2018). Refer to Figure 9.11.12 for a visual representation of the RATER framework.

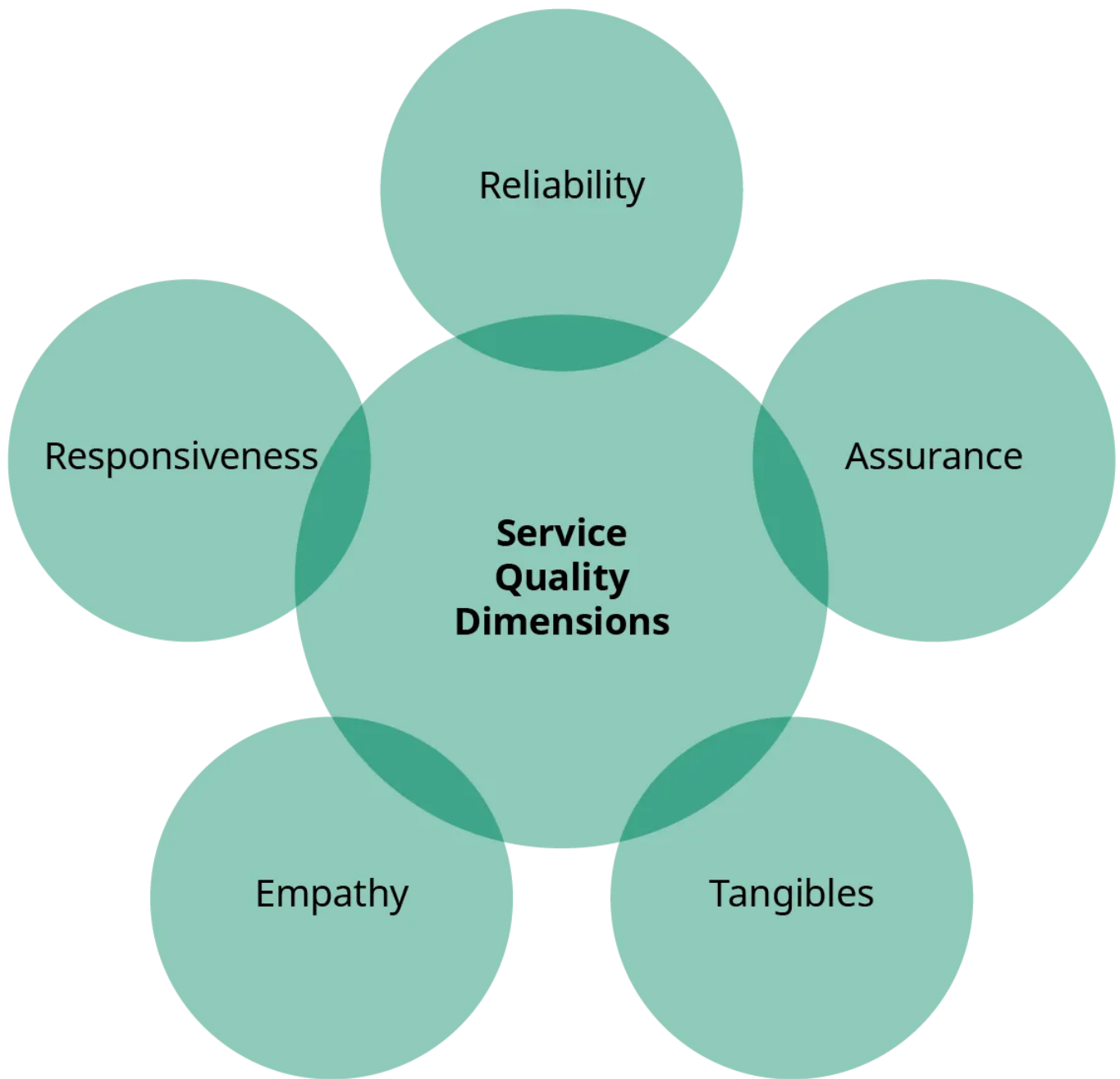


Figure 9.11.12 The RATER Framework of Service Quality (CC BY 4.0; Rice University & OpenStax)

Let's explore each of these dimensions (represented by the acronym RATER) in some detail:

### Reliability

R, for reliability, depicts the organization's capability to provide accurate, dependable, and on-time service. Consistency is critical. Companies that provide on-time, error-free service to customers tend to have repeat customers. Research has shown that service reliability is three times more important to customers than the latest equipment or flashy uniforms. The bottom line regarding service reliability and quality is: Do you deliver as promised? (Arlen, 2018).

### Assurance

A, for assurance, is the degree to which the organization inspires trust in its customers. For example, when you take your sick pet to a veterinarian or have your income tax return prepared (or any other service, for that matter), you expect the service provider to be an expert in the service they're delivering. Research has shown that communicating this expertise to customers is important. If customers aren't aware of that expertise, they often have less confidence in that provider, leading to a low assessment of that provider's service (Arlen, 2018).

Does your organization inspire confidence in its service providers? Whether you're a hairstylist, a physical therapist, a tattoo artist, or any number of other service professions, it's important to communicate your expertise *before* you do the work. For example, a plumber's business card may contain the words "licensed, bonded, and insured." Hairstylists generally display their state licenses in their workspace. Doctors often have framed diplomas in the office from medical school, residencies, and fellowships. These are all ways in which these service providers communicate their competencies. Communicating these competencies to customers helps shape expectations and influence assessments in advance of the service (Arlen, 2018).

### Tangibles

When we talk about tangibles in the RATER model, we're focusing on factors such as the physical appearance of both the physical facility and employees. Does your organization present itself professionally? This is one of the factors in the RATER metric that is hard to define because it takes into account customers' perceptions, and different customers may respond in different, subjective ways to the environment created.

Let's imagine that you're taking that special someone out for a romantic or special-occasion dinner at a fine-dining restaurant. What tangibles contribute to that experience? You may expect knowledgeable, uniformed staff; soft lighting and background music; an appealing menu; and clean restrooms. All of these tangibles will factor into your overall perception of the quality of service you receive.

Another good example of tangibles in terms of the RATER model is the Mayo Clinic in Rochester, Minnesota, where tangibles include Warhol prints on the wall, Chihuly sculptures hanging from the ceiling, and a professionally attired staff who project a sense of caring and expertise. There are 500 original pieces of art from 70 U.S. artists on display throughout the hospital (McCauley, 2012).

Customer perception isn't the only challenge marketers face in terms of tangibles. It's also the fact that, done right, customers may not even notice and point out the tangibles unless their feedback is negative. That's why listening and acting on customer

complaints is critical in improving an organization's tangibles and promoting a strong customer service image (Simplesat, 2021).

### Empathy

Empathy in terms of the RATER model means focusing on customers attentively to ensure that they receive caring and distinguished service. It isn't enough to be efficient and thorough in delivering service to customers—it's also about service providers "connecting" with customers during delivery of the service and making them feel valued.

You may have heard the old saying that it's not *what* was said, it's *how* it was said. The same is true of providing service. For example, let's go back to the example of that special dinner in the fine-dining restaurant. Imagine that you accidentally spill your beverage all over the table. A busser is called to clean the spill, change the tablecloth, and provide you with new silverware and napkins. That busser may have handled those tasks effectively and efficiently but didn't make eye contact, smile, or ask if you needed anything else. In this hypothetical situation, the busser's tasks were performed fully, but you didn't feel they cared about your predicament (Simplesat, 2021).

### Responsiveness

A service staff's desire to treat customers with respect and provide satisfactory and quick service speaks to their responsiveness. This dimension focuses on promptness and willingness. Accordingly, the organization has to ensure that customers are getting quick service, without delay, and with an effort that makes customers believe the company genuinely wants to help them (Kobiruzzaman, 2020).

Responsiveness is directly in line with the time customers wait for an answer or a solution. Have you ever called an organization with a service question and had to play "20 Questions" with the company's automated phone system? You know the drill—press 1 for option A, press 2 for option B, press 3 for option C. The chances are that your patience evaporated after about the fourth telephone prompt and you were left screaming "Representative" into your phone. That's a classic example of a company that needs to focus on its responsiveness if it wants to generate customer loyalty.

#### Link to Learning: Applying the RATER Model to Real-World Companies

Check out this video about Disney guest service and the RATER model.



Also look at this [article that applies the RATER model](#) to Amazon, Thermomix, Apple, and a bank.

### Knowledge Check

It's time to check your knowledge on the concepts presented in this section. Refer to the Answer Key at the end of the book for feedback.

1.

Which gap in the Gap Model of Service Quality represents the difference between what customers expect and what the company thinks they expect?

- a. Communication gap
- b. Customer gap
- c. Knowledge gap
- d. Policy gap

2.

Management in a hotel perceives that the biggest problem in customer service is the length of time that it takes to check in guests, so they have established a policy that check-in will take no more than 5 minutes. Which gap in the Gap Model of Service Quality does this action illustrate?

- a. Policy gap
- b. Delivery gap
- c. Communication gap
- d. Customer gap

3.

In the Gap Model of Service Quality, which dimension is the difference between the customer's expectation of the service and their perception of the experience?

- a. Communication gap
- b. Delivery gap
- c. Customer gap
- d. Knowledge gap

4.

The acronym RATER in the RATER framework of service quality stands for which dimensions of service quality that result in service excellence and lead to higher customer loyalty?

- a. Responsibility, accuracy, tangibles, empathy, and responsiveness
- b. Risk, acceptance, transparency, earnings, and revenue
- c. Reliability, assurance, tangibles, empathy, and responsiveness
- d. Revenue, appreciation, trust, efficiency, and responsibility

5.

Which dimension in the RATER model represents the physical facilities, employees' appearance, equipment, machinery, and information systems?

- a. Assurance
- b. Responsiveness
- c. Transparency
- d. Tangibles

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