

CUSTOMERS' EXPECTATIONS AND PERCEPTIONS OF SERVICE QUALITY: THE CASE OF PICK N PAY SUPERMARKET STORES IN PIETERMARITZBURG AREA, SOUTH AFRICA

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ABSTRACT

Purpose- *The study seeks to measure the customers' expectation levels of service quality in the food retail sector against their perceptions levels of the service quality at Pick n Pay and to determine the gap between customers' expectations and their perceptions of the service quality.*

Design/Methodology/Approach- *Using a SERVQUAL survey instrument a study was conducted with customers from Pick n Pay supermarket stores in Pietermaritzburg, one at Hayfields shopping Centre and the other one at Capital Centre. A sample of 130 participants was selected from the store locations.*

Findings- *Key findings include confirmation that customers have higher expectations for service quality in food retail supermarkets than is anticipated. Gap 5, which is a gap between customers' Expected Service and customers' Perceived Service, was identified.*

Research Limitations- *Pick n Pay's management were very sceptical about conducting a survey to their customer and this had a negative impact on data collection. Research was conducted in winter and the cold weather had a negative impact on the response rate.*

Originality/ Value- *This is one of the few studies which attempted to investigate customers' expectations of service quality in food retail supermarkets.*

Keywords- *Service Quality, Customers' Expectations, SERVQUAL, Service Quality Model.*

1.0 Introduction

Service Quality is crucial in any business as it helps create the bond between the business and its clients (Blem, 1995:6). In today's competitive business environment, service quality is very important to attract and retain customers. This is due to the fact that customers derive their perceptions of service quality on the levels of satisfaction they experience with a particular business. Businesses need to be able to satisfy customers and meet their expectations of service quality in order to gain competitive advantage (Gagliano &Hathcote, 1994:60). Thus marketers need to continually assess customers' expectations of service quality in order to avoid customer dissatisfaction (Zeithaml, Bitner, 1996:56).

A service can be offered by any business, whose main aim is to meet or satisfy customer needs. All retailers provide a service to their customers (Sullivan and Adcock, 2002:6). Retailing is described as the bringing together of customers with final product distributor in the supply chain,

this usually involves some form of direct contact between the retailer and the final consumer, which is a very important feature of retail (Sullivan and Adcock, 2002:6). However, the self-service approach adopted years ago in the food retail sector has resulted in the retail sector providing very limited service to customers. For example the self-service approach shifted the responsibility of selecting and collecting goods from retail employees to customers (Sullivan and Adcock, 2002:6).

The research problem presented in this article is that 'customer's expectation of service quality is generally anticipated to be in line with the acceptable levels of service quality in the food retail supermarket'. Using the SERVQUAL model the authors evaluate customers' expectations against their perceptions of the service quality at Pick n Pay stores in Pietermaritzburg area, South Africa. The objectives of this article are, to measure the customers' expectation levels of service quality in the food retail supermarket and their perceptions

of the service quality, to determine the gap between customers' expectations and their perceptions of the service quality at Pick n Pay and the factors that contributed to the gap. The authors aim to provide information that could assist in improving the service quality in food retail supermarkets. The authors first provide literature on service quality. Research methods used to collect data are discussed; this discussion includes the description of the survey instrument used for data collection, the sample size obtained and the reliability of the findings. Research results and discussions are presented, followed by recommendations, conclusion and the limitations of the study

2.0 Related Literature

2.1 Service Quality

“Service quality is a measure of how well the service level delivered matches customer expectations (Weitz and Wessley, 2002:340). Weitz and Wessley (2002:340) argued that service quality results from customers' expectations of what should the service provider offer, how the provider actually performs to meet those expectations (Weitz and Wessley, 2002:340). Thus delivering quality service means ensuring consistency in service delivery performances on daily basis (Weitz and Wessley, 2002:340). According to Kotler (2007: 68) service quality is very important to attract and retain customers. This is due to the fact that customers derive the perceptions of service quality on the levels of satisfaction they experience with the particular business (Gagliano and Hathcote, 1994:60).

2.2 Customers' Expectations of Service

“Customer expectations are beliefs about service delivery that function as standards or reference point against which performance is judged” (Zeithaml, and Bitner, 1996: 76). These authors develop an argument which is that customers hold different types of expectations for service performance (Zeithaml and Bitner, 2003:60). For example as a result the self-service approach used in food retail sector, supermarket customers may hold different expectations of service performance compared to those they would have when visiting a bank. Customers compare their perceptions of service delivery with these reference points when evaluating service quality and therefore knowing what customers expects is critical in gaining competitive advantage (Zeithaml and Bitner, 2003:60). Failure to understand the levels of service customers expects can mean losing a customer to competitors who are able to meet

customers' expectations and therefore be at a risk of losing business (Zeithaml and Bitner, 2003:60).

2.3 Levels of Expectations

Customers hold different types of expectations about service, the highest type of these are desired service and adequate service (Zeithaml, Bitner and Gremler, 2009:77) “Desired service is the level of service the customer hopes to receive” (Zeithaml, Bitner and Gremler, 2009:77). It is a combination of what customers believe “can be” and “should be” (Zeithaml, Bitner and Gremler, 2009:77). The expectations signal the level of customer hopes and wishes and belief that they may be fulfilled, thus failure to meet these expectations may result to customers cutting down on purchase (Zeithaml, Bitner and Gremler, 2009:77). Customers generally accept that the service would not always be performed according to their expectations and this is formerly known as adequate service (Zeithaml, Bitner and Gremler, 2009:77). Adequate service is the level of service that customers will accept (Zeithaml, Bitner and Gremler, 2009:77). Though customers' hopes and wishes may still be high, they however have a certain level of understanding in cases where receiving desired service does not seem possible at all (Zeithaml, Bitner and Gremler, 2009:77). For example customers are used to the self-service approach used in supermarket and therefore have certain levels of understanding or tolerance towards food retailers' service delivery.

2.4 The Zone of Tolerance

The zone of tolerance is defined as the degree to which customers recognize and are willing to accept service performance varies (Zeithaml, Bitner and Gremler, 2009:80). Customers assess service performance on the basis of two boundaries: what they desire and what they consider acceptable (Zeithaml, Bitner and Gremler, 2009:77). If service drops below adequate service level, customers get frustrated and this may cause dissatisfaction with the service provided by the company (Zeithaml, Bitner and Gremler, 2009:80). If service is above the zone of tolerance, where service performed by the business exceeds the desired level, customers will have favourable responses to the business (Zeithaml, Bitner and Gremler, 2009:80). This becomes a problem when service performance falls below what customers are willing to accept. The service gets customers' attention in either positive or negative way (Zeithaml, Bitner and Gremler, 2009:80). However, the zone of tolerance for supermarket may be justified by the argument presented by Elvy that supermarket use the self-service approach on their

customers, which result to them being more tolerable towards service quality that is below what they desire (1995:7).

In addition different customers have different levels of service tolerance (Zeithaml, Bitner and Gremler, 2009:80). Some customers have narrow zones of tolerance and expect a narrow range of service from providers; whereas on the other hand some customers have higher levels of service expectations that if not met cause dissatisfaction (Zeithaml, Bitner and Gremler, 2009: 80). Customer's zone of tolerance increases or decreases with the influence of a number of factors including price (Zeithaml, Bitner and Gremler, 2009:81). For example when prices are high customer expect quality service and therefore are less tolerant of poor or unreliable service (Zeithaml, Bitner and Gremler, 2009:81).

Customers' service tolerance also varies for different service features or dimensions (Zeithaml, Bitner and Gremler, 2009:81). The more important the service factor the less tolerant customers become towards bad or unreliable service (Zeithaml, Bitner and Gremler, 2009:81). Thus this concludes the point that the higher the expectations of customers, the higher adequate service levels are, therefore the broader the zone of tolerance is likely to be (Zeithaml, Bitner and Gremler, 2009:81).

2.5 Perceptions of service Quality

Perceptions are always considered in relation to expectations (Zeithaml, Bitner and Gremler, 2009:87). Perceptions are formed through customers' assessment of the quality of service provided by a company and whether they are satisfied with the overall service (Zeithaml and Bitner, 2003, p.84). (Zeithaml, Bitner and Gremler, 2009:102) Zeithaml and Bitner (2003) argue that because perceptions may shift over time and therefore it is necessary for companies to continually assess customer perceptions (Zeithaml and Bitner, 2003:85).

2.6 Service Quality Model

The gap model is a very useful measure for evaluating customers' expectations and perceptions of whether a particular company delivers excellent service. This model identifies contributing factors to the customer and provider gap and recommends strategies a company may use to maintain a focus on customers (Zeithaml and Bitner, 2003:27). According to Bouding, Kalra, Staelin and Zeithaml (1993:8), "in the model, the consumer's perception

of overall service quality results from a comparison between expectations and perceptions of the different components of service" (1993:8).

Thus the overall quality is presented by Gap 5, which is determined by subtracting expectations from perceptions (Bouding, Kalra, Staelin and Zeithaml 1993:8). The Gap model emphasizes the importance of closing the gap between expectations and perceptions by first understanding what customers' expect. Thus this will lead to identification of other gaps that the business will have to close in order to deliver high quality service that will satisfy customers.

3.0 SERVQUAL

Assessing customers' expectations and perceptions of service quality requires an understanding of customers' relationship with the service provider (Zeithaml, Bitner and Gremler, 2009:151). Thus according to Zeithaml, Bitner and Gremler (2009:107), "a sound measure of service quality is necessary for identifying the aspects of service needing performance improvement, assessing how much improvement is needed on each aspect, and evaluating the impact of improvement efforts" Due to the intangible nature of a service SERVQUAL model was developed to measure customers' evaluations of service quality (Zeithaml, Bitner and Gremler, 2009:151).

The SERVQUAL scale is designed in a form of a survey containing 22 service attributes, grouped into the five service quality dimensions (Zeithaml, Bitner and Gremler, 2009:151). The service quality dimensions used in the SERVQUAL model are; tangibles, which refers to appearance of physical facilities, equipment, personnel and written materials; reliability, which is ability to perform the promised service dependably and accurately; responsiveness, which is the willingness to help customers and provide prompt service; assurance, which refers to employees' knowledge and courtesy of employees and their ability to inspire trust and confidence and empathy, which refers to caring, individualized attention given to customers by the company (Zeithaml and Bitner, 2003:93). Customers' rate statements on service attribute in terms of their expectations and the perceptions (Zeithaml, Bitner and Gremler, 2009:151). The level of service quality is determined by subtracting the average score obtained from the expectations section to that obtained from the perceptions section (Weitz and Wessley, 2002:350). The calculated difference between the expectations and perception ratings constitutes a quantified measure

of service quality (Weitz and Wessley, 2002:350). The SERVQUAL Scale has been used by many organisations, with of course adaptations to suit the research context.

4.0 Methodology

4.1 Sample Design

A sample of 130 customers was selected from two Pick n Pay supermarket stores in Pietermaritzburg area for the study. The research used Non-Probability sampling in selecting the research participants. Using the Non-Probability, also referred to as convenient sampling, enabled the researcher to locate and distribute questionnaires to people who have had a service encounter with the Pick n Pay stores that the study focused on. Non-Probability sampling provided the researcher convenience and assisted in avoiding high research costs in that each element of the population did not have a known, nonzero chance of being included in the research (Welman *et al*, 2007:23). However, only those customers that had just experienced the service with the two Pick n Pay Supermarket stores and who were willing to participate in the research formed the research sample.

4.2 Survey Instrument Design

The survey instrument that was used to collect primary data was the SERVQUAL questionnaire. The questionnaire consisted of 22 statements of service attributes grouped into five service quality dimensions that were highlighted in the previous section of conceptual framework. Participants were asked provide the ratings of both expectations and perceptions on the provided statements related to service quality. The service quality statements used in the survey were rated using a five- point Likert scale, with 1 indicating STRONGLY AGREE, 2 AGREE, 3 NEUTRAL, 4 DISAGREE, and 5 STRONGLY DISAGREE. Thus the difference obtained from subtracting the expectation scores from the perception scores revealed the gap between customers' expectations and their perception of the service quality at Pick n Pay stores. The total reliability obtained on the standardized items using the Cronbach's Alpha was .959 which means that consistency was achieved in all the items used in the survey.

5.0 Results and Discussions

Data was analysed by quantifying respondents' responses of their levels of agreement with the statements that were used to evaluate customers' expectations of service quality at an excellent supermarket and perceptions of service quality at

Pick n Pay Supermarket stores in Pietermaritzburg area. The levels of service quality expectations and perceptions were quantified by calculating the average scores on each statement. Scores obtained from calculating the averages for expectations were subtracted from the scores obtained from customers' perceptions on each statement.

The findings of the study present very important insights in relation to the paper's problem statement that "customer's expectation is generally anticipated to be in line with the acceptable levels of service quality in the food retail supermarket. The results revealed that customers had higher expectation levels compared to their perceptions of the service quality at Pick n Pay on all the service attribute that were used to evaluate the expectations of service quality. Thus the gap identified was **Gap 5: Expected Service-Perceived Service Gap**. Gap 5 presents a challenge for marketers, which is ensuring that good quality provided meets or exceeds customers' expectations (Cottam and Mudie, 1999:86).

The average expectations scores were consistently around 1, where 1 on the five point scale used in the questionnaire indicated a strongly agree response. According to Cook (2002:3), consumers have become sophisticated, educated, confident and informed; as a result they have high expectations of service they want to receive. As customer become more aware of better service their expectations rise (Cook, 2002: 6). The perceptions of the service received by customers are highly dependent on the kinds of expectations they have (Cook, 2002:14). Perceptions average scores seemed to be closer to 2, where 2 indicated moderate agree responses, thus resulting to negative gaps in all the statements.

5.1 Tangibles

The dimension with the highest expectations level but lowest gap between expectations and perceptions was found to be the tangible dimension. Tangibles consist of those things that a customer can see or touch (Kurtz and Clow, 1998:78). The tangibles includes the appearance of physical facilities, the furniture, the equipment uses to perform services, cleanliness, point of purchase display as well as the appearance of employees (Kurt and Clow,1998:78). The results in this dimension showed that customers had high expectations for an excellent supermarket to have modern looking equipment. However, when their perceptions of Pick n Pay's equipment were compared to their expectation levels a gap of -0.23 was found. This means that customers' perceptions

of Pick n Pay as actually having modern looking equipment were lower than what they expected. Though customers' expectations for modern looking equipment exceeded their perceptions of Pick n Pay stores as actually having modern looking equipment, they were somehow fairly satisfied with the equipment at the Pick n Pay stores. Thus this confirms the argument that the higher the expectations of customers and the higher the adequate service levels are, the broader the zone of tolerance is likely to be (Zeithaml, Bitner and Gremler, 2009:81).

The expectations of visually appealing physical facilities also exceeded customers' perceptions of Pick n Pay's facilities, resulting to a gap of -0.3. This gap was not big, suggesting that customers were fairly satisfied with Pick n Pay's physical facilities appeal. However, Pick n Pay's physical facilities appearances are not on the levels that customers would expect from an excellent supermarket. Thus Pick n Pay stores need to improve their physical facilities visual appeal, in order to change the negative perceptions of customers.

Customers' expectations of neat appearing employees were also higher than their perceptions resulting to a gap of -0.5. Personnel appearance is one of the tangible cues by which customers judge the service quality of an organisation and since a service and a service provider cannot be separated, it is therefore crucial that there is a balance between the service and the person who is providing it in order to deliver quality service (Cook, 2000:12).

Customers also had higher expectations for materials associated with services to be visually appealing compared to their perceptions of the material at Pick n Pay stores. This resulted to a gap score of -0.36 between customers' expectations and their perceptions of Pick n Pay's materials associated with services as being visually appealing. This suggests that customers are not satisfied with the visual appeal of materials associated with services at Pick n Pay.

The findings obtained in this dimension of tangibles implies that Pick n Pay's physical environment appeal was found to be below the desired state that customers expected, however customers were fairly satisfied with some of the service attribute in this dimension except for the service attribute regarding the neatness of employees, which presented a big gap between customers' expectations and their perceptions of the employees at Pick n Pay. Pick n Pay stores thus need to improve in their tangible dimension,

especially the neatness of employees, in order to improve customers' perceptions of their physical environment.

5.2 Reliability

Reliability is the consistency of performance and the dependability of an organisation's performance (Klefsjo and Bergman, 1997:267). The reliability dimension had the highest gaps score. Customers' expectation levels vary in this dimension according to which service attribute was being evaluated. However, on all the statements in this dimension customers' expectations exceeded their perceptions of the service quality at the Pick n Pay stores. Expectations for having an excellent supermarket that performs the service at the time they promise to do so, which was asked on statement 5 and 8, exceeded customers perceptions of Pick n Pay actually performing the service at the time promised. These two statements got almost similar result with statement 5 having a gap score of -0.51 and statement 8 having a gap score of -0.52. These two statements however, received a lot of neutral responses on customers' perceptions of the Pick n Pay stores as actually performing their services at the time promised.

The reason why they may have been a high neutral response to this statement may because of what Cook (2000: 12) refers to as under promise, over deliver. The self-service approached used in supermarkets has resulted in supermarket not making any service related promises. Thus this service attribute was not considered by many as relevant to the supermarket context. Nevertheless, the gap score obtained from this statement reveals that there were customers who highly expected to be informed when the services will be performed. The two Pick n Pay stores need to put more effort to their service delivery and improve in order to satisfy their customers.

Another statement in this dimension asked participants if an excellent supermarket will show sincere interest in solving customers' problems. The levels of expected service exceeded customers' perceptions of Pick n Pay as actually performing excellent in this service attribute. A gap of -0.61 was found between customers' expectations and their perceptions. The gap implies that customers had higher expectations for an excellent supermarket to show sincere interest in solving their problems, however they felt that the Pick n Pay stores were not performing to their desired levels in this service attribute. This statement was also found to be one of the highest contributors to the gap. According to Jobber (1995: 672),

“research on consumer loyalty in the service industry showed that only 14 percent of customers who stopped patronizing services business did so because they were dissatisfied with the quality of what they did. More than two-thirds stopped buying because they found staff indifferent or unhelpful”.

Customers expectations for the service performance to be right the first time also exceeded their perceptions of Pick n Pay stores as performing the service right the first time. A gap of -0.38 was identified that will need to be closed in order for Pick n Pay's customers to be satisfied with stores' service delivery.

The levels of customers' expectations on the statement regarding a supermarket insisting on error-free records were moderately high. Customers had moderately high expectations to this statement with the average score of 2.02. However, their expectations, though moderate, still exceeded their perception of the service quality at Pick n Pay. The perceptions average score of 2.47 was obtained from this statement resulting to a gap of -0.45. This suggests that customers perceived the Pick n Pay store as not meeting their expectations in insisting on error-free records and therefore the Pick n Pay stores need to improve in providing error-free records to their customers in order to close this gap.

5.3. Responsiveness

“Differences in the ‘shopping experience’ between retail outlets (e.g. store ambience, disposition of associates, store service) are often as important to customers as the differences in physical characteristics of the goods offered (Wittink, McLaugh and Gomez, 2004:265)”. Customers' expectations exceeded their perceptions in all the service statements under the responsiveness dimension. “The reason why employees' responsiveness usually lacks is because organizations often focus on hard skills training. This includes training in the areas of product knowledge, technical skills and administrations, while deemphasizing the importance of positive attitude in the way employees deal with customers” (Cook, 2002:12). Customers' expectations for employees to tell them exactly when services will be performed exceeded their perceptions of Pick n Pay as actually performing this service attribute according to their expectations. This resulted to a gap of -0.59 that was obtained after subtracting the expectations from perceptions. This gap was negative, implying that Pick n Pay's service quality was less than what customers expected. Customers were not satisfied with this service attribute at the

Pick n Pay stores. Thus Pick n Pay employees should be able to tell customers exactly when services will be performed, in order to improve customers' perceptions of their responsiveness.

Responsiveness also reflects employee preparedness to provide the service to customers (Hoffman and Bateson, 2001:336). Customers were found to have high expectation levels for the employees of an excellent supermarket to provide prompt service. The expectations had an average score of 1.67 compared to the perceptions which had an average score of 2.22. A gap of -0.55 was identified between customers' expectations and their perceptions. This gap shows that customers had higher expectation for an excellent supermarket to give prompt service to customers than they actually perceived of the Pick n Pay stores as actually giving prompt service to customers.

The expectation levels of service quality on the statement regarding employees' willingness to help customers were also higher than what customers actually perceive of the Pick n Pay's employees. This resulted to a gap score of -0.65. According Hoffman and Bateson (2001:331), employees' willingness to help customers may be affected by a number of factors and may vary greatly from one employee to the next. The unwillingness to perform may be as a result of employee frustration and dissatisfaction with the job (Hoffman and Bateson, 2001:331).

Customers' expectations to the statement that employees should never be too busy to respond to customers' request were also high. Customers' expectations exceeded their perceptions in this service attribute, resulting to a gap of -0.65. This service attribute was found as one of the highest contributors to the gap. Literature reveals that sometimes the service provider may be expected to do too much work and therefore get frustrated and end up losing commitment to provide the best service. This can affect negatively the service delivery and the satisfaction of customers as it all depends on the actions of employees (Zeithaml and Bitner 2003:22). Pick n Pay stores need to improve their internal relations management in order to motivate their employees to perform excellent and meet customers' expectations.

5.4 Assurance

Assurance is one of the most important factors of service quality. This is due to the fact that customers want to deal with people they can trust (Cook, 2000:12). Customers highly expected the

behaviour of employees of an excellent supermarket to instil confidence. However, their perceptions of the behaviour of Pick n Pay's employees' as instilling confidence were below their desired service levels. Customers' responses reflected lower service quality perceptions about the behaviour Pick n Pay's employees' as instilling confidence. A gap of -0.42 was found from this statement after subtracting the expectations average score of 1.85 from the perceptions average score of 2.27.

The levels of customers' expectations to the statement that customers should feel safe in their transactions with an excellent supermarket were also found to be high. However, their perceptions of feeling safe in their transactions with Pick n Pay were lower than their expectations, resulting to a gap of -0.38. This suggests that customers are not completely comfortable in their transactions with Pick n Pay, which means Pick n Pay stores need to find ways to earn customers' trust.

Expectations for employees who are consistently courteous with customers were also high. Customers' expectations exceeded their perceptions in this service attribute, leaving a gap of -0.58. The behaviour of employees, their attitudes and emotions are visible to customers and affect the service experience either positively or negatively (Hoffman and Bateson, 2001:36). Pick n Pay's employees have to improve in being courteous with customers in order to improve customers' perceptions of the service quality and close the existing gap. As it has been argued that if a service provider is irritable, seems to be frustrated, whether from personal problems or from interactions with customers the mood affects the quality of the service delivered (Zeithaml, Bitner and Gremler, 2009:62).

Employees need to be trained about the details of what products can and cannot do (Hoffman and Bateson, 2001:126). Customers' expectations for employees to have knowledge to answer to their questions were also higher than their perceptions of Pick n Pay's employees as having knowledge to answer to customers' questions. A gap of -0.44 was found suggesting that the quality of the service represented by this statement was not as excellent at Pick n Pay stores as customers would have like it to be. It is crucial that employees are knowledgeable, technically able and consistently courteous with customers in order to keep them satisfied (Cook, 2000:12).

5.5 Empathy

Service encounter is the point at which the customer experiences the service. Service encounters are very important as they affect a customer's experience, thus having a negative experience may result to customers having negative perceptions about the service quality offered by a business (Zeithaml and Bitner, 2003:101).

The difference between the expectations and perceptions scores to the statement regarding giving the customers individual attention revealed a gap of -0.36. Employees need to perform their roles according to the expectations of the customers (Zeithaml, Bitner and Gremler, 2009:62). Failure to perform the service according to customers' expectations can result to customer dissatisfaction (Zeithaml, Bitner and Gremler, 2009:62). Though customers' expectations of service quality were not too intense in this service attribute, Pick n Pay stores were still perceived by customers as not matching their desired service levels.

Customers' expectations for an excellent supermarket to have operating hours convenient to customer were also higher than their perceptions of the Pick n Pay stores as actually having operating hours convenient to all their customers. A gap of -0.23 was found between customers' expectations and their perceptions of the service quality at the Pick n Pay stores. However this gap was small, suggesting that customers were fairly satisfied with Pick n Pay's operating hours.

Customers' expectations to the statement that an excellent supermarket will give customers personal attention exceeded their perceptions of the Pick n Pay stores as giving them personal attention. The expectations had an average score of 2.05 compared to the perceptions score of 2.51. This resulted to a gap of -0.46. This gap shows that the Pick n Pay stores need improve in this service attribute. Customers want be treated as individuals, to be valued and to feel that their custom is important (Cook, 2000:13).

Customers' expectation levels were also high on the service excellence statement about an excellent supermarket having customers' best interest at heart. Expectations exceeded perceptions resulting to a gap of -0.38. This gap implies that though customers' expectations were not too intense in this service attribute, the Pick n Pay stores still need to improve, in order to match customers' expectations.

Results revealed that customers' expectations for an excellent supermarket to understand their specific needs were high. This statement was one of the highest contributors to the gap. The average score obtained in this statement suggests that customers highly expect an excellent supermarket to understand their specific needs. The gap score obtained in this statement was -0.55. This gap implies that Pick n Pay stores needs to improve in this service attribute in order to improve customer satisfaction.

6.0 Recommendations

Retailers, including Pick n Pay in South Africa, should manage customer expectations (Mudie and Cottam, 1999:90). The results of the study have revealed that customers have high expectations of service quality in supermarkets. Thus Pick n Pay and other food retailers need to improve in their service attributes that reflected big gaps between customer expectations and their perception. They should design service standards that promote reliability to customers, consistency in service delivery and not promising more than they can be able to deliver. Consumers had very high expectation on the responsiveness dimension, thus this provided an understanding that retailers should teach their personnel to be responsive to customers. Employees should always be prepared and willing to assist customers and stay polite in all their service performances (Hoffman and Bateson, 2001:336). Identifying factors that contribute to the gap would help retailers match customers' expectations in their service delivery.

7.0 Conclusion

From the research results, this article can conclude that customers' expectations of service quality in supermarkets are higher than their perceptions of service quality at Pick n Pay, therefore this proves that the customer expectation of service quality is not in line with the acceptable levels of service quality in the food retail sector. Customers have higher service quality expectations that if not met by Pick n Pay can result to customer dissatisfaction and losing customers to competitors. The service provided by Pick n Pay may however, be perceived as at the adequate level, which is the minimum level of service the consumers will tolerate without being dissatisfied, however the customer expectation is still beyond the levels of service quality in the food retail supermarket. It can also be concluded that the customer expectation of service quality in the food retail sector is not in line with the acceptable levels of service quality in this sector as anticipated. Pick n Pay and other food retail sectors should improve their service quality

on all the factors discussed in this research paper as contributing the most to the Customer Perceived Service and Expected Service gap in order to match customers' expectations.

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