

## Customer value in restaurants in Port Elizabeth: what customers experience and what managers perceive

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### Abstract

Delivering value for customers has become a central theme in restaurants. The paper examines customer value from two perspectives, i.e. that of restaurant management and that of the customer. The questionnaires were based on the DINESERV model (developed by Stevens, Knutson & Patton, 1995). A total 207 managers and 400 customers responded to the survey. A descriptive quantitative study design was followed and a systematic sampling method was used to select respondents. The empirical results show that on a 5 point Likert scale, the overall mean score for customer experiences was 4.10 whilst the overall mean score for managers' perceptions was 4.20 giving an overall DINESERV gap of -0.10. Overall, customers' experiences of customer value fell below managers' perceptions of customer value. These results suggest there is a need to align management and customer perspectives to optimize customer value as delivered and experienced. Specifically, restaurants should improve the food and beverage knowledge of frontline staff, particularly waiters.

**Key words:** DINESERV, Food and beverage, Customer value, Quantitative study, Management



Source: <http://www.junkmail.co.za/blog/wp-content/uploads/2012/11/Kings-Beach.jpg>

## Introduction

It has become increasingly difficult to satisfy modern restaurant customers (Ngoc & Uyen, 2015). Today's customers seek unique experiences that are about more than just consuming food (Khan, 2012). In order to gain a competitive edge, restaurants have to continuously and efficiently create more values towards their customers (Choi & Chu, 2001). In addition, restaurateurs need to put more emphasis in improving the quality of their service offerings in order to ensure that the needs and expectations of their guests are met (Reynolds & Biel, 2007). Consequently, delivering value for customers should become a central theme for restaurateurs (Kivela, Inbakaran & Reece, 1999a).

Wu and Liang (2009) aver that it is a widely held belief of modern business that satisfying the customer is crucial to the long term success of any business. The key to increasing profits is to have an in-depth understanding of the target market and their value requirements (Andaleeb & Conway, 2006). Consequently, when a restaurant invests to improve the performance of the value-added core activities, the profit potential will increase as guests are willing to pay for these value-adding core activities (Chi & Gursoy, 2009).

Providing superior value has a positive impact on stakeholders, that is, customers, employees and shareholders (Mittal & Sheth, 2001). Restaurants with a strong commitment to delivering of superior customer value would benefit from a supportive corporate culture that focuses on customers' expressed and latent needs (Pantelidis, 2010). Customer value has been associated with superior financial performance, strong customer orientation and customer satisfaction (Söderlund & Öhman, 2005). Satisfied customers are more likely to repurchase product/service and spread positive word-of-mouth (Petrick, 2002). In the long-run, restaurants that are successful in maintaining delivery of superior value build customer loyalty and customer retention

both of which drive up shareholder value (Mittal & Sheth, 2001).

Cheng (2005) pointed out that it is important to grasp the value perception of the target population. Within this scope, it is of great importance to determine the value perception of customers in restaurants (Liu & Jang, 2009). Determining the value perception of customers will not only give the opportunity to boost quality in services offered but help find out whether such restaurants are an alternative to other ones (Thorn, 2003). Therefore, value construct is of great importance from the point of competitive power of the restaurants (Khan, 2012). Customer value can be viewed from two different perspectives: that of the service provider or that of the customers and the perspectives would be expected to differ (Nasution & Mavondo, 2008). That is, gaps might arise between perceptions of the service by the service provider and perceptions of the service by the service receiver (Chi & Gursoy, 2009). Specifically, in the restaurant industry, there are some problems involved in the evaluation of customer value (Wong, 2004). Some customers may perceive a service as being comparatively unimportant while for others it is critical (Mattila, 2001). Management has to optimize under such conditions and may place significant importance upon the tangible components of the restaurants such as good décor, etc. to cover for the diversity of their guests (Andaleeb & Conway, 2006).

Previous studies have examined customer value from the customer's perspective (Sanchez, Callarisa, Rodriguez & Moliner, 2005) or the provider's perspective (Eggert & Ulaga, 2002; Liu, Leach & Bernhardt, 2005) but rarely has research sought to achieve both perspectives in a single study, in particular in restaurants. There are several studies in this area that had been published in the hospitality and tourism context mainly related to service quality topics (Baker & Crompton, 2000; Ekinci & Riley, 2001). This research seeks to achieve this, that is, customer value as

seen by the provider and also as seen by the customer. In other words, the paper seeks to investigate different perceptions of customer value between managers and customers in restaurants.

### Literature Review

From a managerial perspective customer value has to be planned for, resources deployed to achieve the desired level and personnel put in place to implement the plan (Ngoc & Uyen, 2015). For the customer value is a lived experience and is generally a trade off between benefits and costs. In the restaurant, value is delivered through a number of vehicles including quality of food, ambient of the restaurant and presence of WiFi (Khan, 2012). Thus, value is a bundle of tangibles and intangibles and differs in configuration across individuals. There are reasonable grounds to expect differences between management's evaluation of customer service and what customers actually experience. Fundamentally, the difference is due to the fact that for managers customer value is a business product to be delivered to customers while for the customer this is a service to be experienced (Parasuraman, Zeithaml & Berry, 1988). An important source of additional difference is communication. Restaurants may aim at conveying a specific image and raise a certain level of expectation. The restaurant guests may perceive and interpret this differently. This is consistent with Sulek and Hensley (2004) who note the perceptions of guests and restaurant managers in the restaurant industry differ due to differences in expectations of quality of service.

The process of delivering customer value in a restaurant setting involves three parties, that is, employees, managers and customers (Sulek & Hensley, 2004). Therefore, there are possibilities of errors in the complex and highly interactive service delivery process (Geissler & Rucks, 2011). Since for managers customer service is a product, the customers' experience should be seen as the primary guideline of the quality of customer value hence restaurant manager

must be attuned to "listening to the customer" (Markovic, Raspor & Segaric, 2010). Specifically, Susskind (2002) suggest that management should do informal research, that is, "managing by walking around", and formal research on customer needs and customer expectations. There is additional pressure management in providing superior customer value consistently in that there needs to be effective human resource practices need to be in place.

Previous studies have identified potential discrepancies between management perception and customers' actual experience in the restaurant industry. That is, managers overestimate the service they are providing (Markovic *et al.*, 2010; Zopiatis & Pribic, 2007). In addition, managers are likely to have high expectations for the level of service that the organization is providing (Mohsin, McIntosh & Cave, 2005). This implies that managers do not have an in-depth understanding of customers' expressed and latent needs. Consistent with Nasution and Mavondos' (2008) research, the researcher hypothesize that there are difference between customers' experiences and management perceptions of the level of customer value. More fundamentally, management perception is really one thing: perhaps planned or emerging customer value. On the other hand, customer value as from the customer's point of view is an experience; it is actual and lived experience (Ladhari, Brun & Morales, 2008). This may lead to differences in evaluating the same phenomenon.

The delivery of services involves employees, managers, and customers; this may create differences between the perceptions of service delivered as seen by managers and services experienced by customers (Liu & Jang, 2009). These differences arise as a result of lack of congruency between managers' plans and how they are carried out by employees (Namkung & Jang, 2008). Differences between managers and customers could also arise from communication (what managers planned to communicate) and

the messages received by customers (Sulek & Hensley, 2004). Since employees have more contact with customers, the differences between managers and employees would further exacerbate differences between managers and customers (Kim, Ng & Kim, 2009). Therefore, customers and managers are expected to evaluate delivered customer service (Nasution & Mavondo, 2008).

### **Problem Statement**

Despite the increasing popularity of eating out (Andaleeb & Conway, 2006) formal full service restaurants in South Africa have shown a negative growth rate, with statistics showing a decline of 5.3% in total income in 2012 compared to 2011, as customers opt to eat in fast food restaurants (Datamonitor, 2013). Researchers (Soriano, 2002; Chi & Gursoy, 2009) identify restaurateurs' inability to satisfy their customers' expectations and experiences as one of the main reasons for formal full service restaurant failure.

As such, a study to determine the expectations and experiences of customers has been visualised. The results of the study could increase the level of customer satisfaction and conceptualise restaurant customers' probability of intention to return to Port Elizabeth Restaurants (Oh & Jeong, 2000). Port Elizabeth is considered as the gate way to the Garden Route and a well-known tourist destination in the Eastern Cape Province.

### **Methodology**

In accordance with the objectives of this study survey design was used. The survey was administered to managers and customers in formal full-service restaurants. A formal full-service restaurant refers to an up market restaurant that offers table service with complete, varied menus and multiple entrees for each meal period which may include soups, salads and/or desserts (Feinstein & Stefanelli, 2008). Most formal full-service restaurants provide customer

seating with gastronomy, sophisticated service, elegant ambience and liquor service. Usually, these restaurants will not permit casual wear. A list of local registered formal full-service restaurants was obtained from the Nelson Mandela metropolitan municipality and also from the Restaurant Directory of South Africa (2014). Only 10 formal full-service restaurants complied with the criteria, of which two were used for the pilot study. The remaining eight restaurants were included in the main study. This research employed two self-administered questionnaires bearing in mind the research objectives of the study: one for restaurant managers the other for restaurant guests. The questionnaires were based on the DINESERV model (developed by Stevens, Knutson & Patton, 1995) which has been applied in previous restaurant research. The DINESERV model was deemed suitable since it is restaurant specific (Kivela et al., 1999a ; O'Neil & Palmer, 2001) and also measures the essential components of the restaurant experience namely; the quality of food, service and ambience (Namkung & Jang, 2008) which were all used in this study. Restaurant customers and managers were requested to rate their experiences and perceptions respectively, with the following dining attributes: food quality, service quality and ambience. These descriptors were selected, since various scholars (Susskind, 2002; Soriano, 2002; Sulek & Hensley, 2004) identify these factors as the most essential components of the restaurant experience.

To be able to measure customer experiences, a 5-point Likert-type scale drawn from DeVellis (1991) was employed in the questionnaire to illustrate the degree of experiences. The scale ranged from "very low experiences – (1)", "low experiences – (2)", "indifferent – (3)", "high experiences – (4)", to "very high experiences – (5)". To be able to measure managers' perceptions, a 5-point Likert-type scale drawn from DeVellis (1991) was employed in the questionnaire to illustrate the degree of perceptions. The scale ranged from "very low perceptions – (1)", "low perceptions – (2)", "indifferent –

(3)", "high perceptions – (4)", to "very high perceptions – (5)". Several authors (MacLaurin & MacLaurin, 2000; Choi & Chu, 2001; Park, 2004) find a Likert-type scale to be a useful tool in measuring restaurant experiences and perceptions. To measure customer value, managers' perceptions were subtracted from customer experiences. Customer value is a trade-off between total experienced benefits and total perceived sacrifices (Nasution & Mavondo, 2008). The research sample included in the study entailed relevant data that were collected from 207 managers and 400 customers of the eight selected formal full-service restaurants in Port Elizabeth. The sample sizes concerned were based on Isaacs and Michaels' (1981) table, which determines how a randomly chosen sample from a given finite population should be ascertained. According to the table, Isaacs and Michael (1981) postulate that if the population size (N) has a 95% level of confidence, the sample size (S) proportion would be within 5% of the population value, which enables all samples to be drawn at random. Therefore, a sample size of 207 managers and 400 customers was adequate. A descriptive quantitative study design (McMillan & Schumacher, 2006) was followed. Probability sampling was used since it is based on the principles of randomness and the probability theory, to accurately generalise to the population (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2007).

In order to guarantee equal representation of each of the restaurants, proportional stratified random sampling was used to find the sample size for a particular restaurant taking into account the restaurant's seating capacity (Cooper & Schindler, 2003). A proportional sample of 22.5% of the total seating capacity per restaurant enabled the researcher to obtain at least 400 completed questionnaires.

Systematic sampling, which is a probability sampling method, was then used to select respondents by systematically moving through the sample frame and selecting every *k*th element.

This method is useful in situations where the population members arrive at a certain location over time (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2007). As such, respondents were selected by systematically targeting every fourth customer who walked into the restaurant until the sample size for a particular restaurant was reached.

A decision to target every fourth customer was made based in order to be discreet and avoid annoying other customers who were not participating in the survey, as advised by Kivela, Inbakaran & Reece (1999b). The restaurant manager from each participating restaurant was approached for permission to conduct the study. Data were collected in November and December 2012 during weekdays, weekends and across these two months during lunch and dinner as recommended by various researchers (Kivela *et al.*, 1999b; Sulek & Hensley, 2004). This is done to maximise chances of eliciting information from customers of different lifestyles, occupation, income, age and gender (Kivela *et al.*, 1999b). The following procedures were used for collect data. The researcher systematically approached every fourth customer who walked into the restaurant after they were seated in the restaurant or as they were scanning/perusing the menu. The researcher explained the aim of the study to the customers and asked them to participate. It was emphasised that the researcher would treat the information provided as confidential and anonymous. Customers who were willing to participate in the study received a questionnaire. Completed questionnaires were collected, checked and discussed with the respondents in case of any queries. Data was analysed using the Statistical Package for Social Sciences which is a statistical analysis software programme (SPSS 22, 2014).

## Results and Discussion

By using descriptive and bivariate analysis the means and standard deviations of customers' experiences and managers' perceptions of customer value in the eight formal full service restaurant settings are

presented (Table 1). The table also reflects the means and standard deviations for food and beverage, service

quality and ambience as well as the gaps and t-values for food and beverage, service quality and ambience.

Table 1: Means and standard deviations for customers' experiences and managers' perceptions of food and beverages, service quality and ambience

	Attributes	Customers' experiences		Managers' perceptions		Customer value (Gap)	t-value
		Mean	SD	Mean	SD		
	<b>Food and beverages</b>						
V1	Presentation of the food	4.13	0.76	4.29	0.91	-0.16	8.47*
V2	Combination of food on the plate	4.30	0.85	4.47	1.06	-0.17	9.81*
V3	Garnishing	4.33	0.89	4.35	0.61	-0.02	2.29
V4	Colour of food	4.27	1.02	4.38	0.77	-0.11	7.61*
V5	Colour of beverages	4.28	0.93	4.33	0.63	-0.05	9.88*
V6	Smell or odour of food	4.22	1.02	4.39	0.82	-0.17	5.81*
V7	Smell or odour of beverages	4.29	0.95	4.31	0.71	-0.02	2.14
V8	Taste of food	4.38	1.00	4.41	0.68	-0.03	2.41
V9	Taste of beverages	4.35	0.96	4.43	0.76	-0.08	7.39*
V10	Texture of the food	4.14	0.95	4.27	0.83	-0.13	4.36*
V11	Temperature of food	4.26	0.94	4.33	0.75	-0.07	6.81*
V12	Temperature of beverages	4.23	0.90	4.28	0.81	-0.05	5.11*
V13	Variety of menu items	4.22	0.86	4.29	0.76	-0.07	9.81*
V14	Value-for-money	4.37	0.71	4.49	0.69	-0.12	4.27*
V15	Overall quality of food and beverages	4.29	0.74	4.30	0.88	-0.01	1.07
	<b>Service</b>						
V16	Friendliness and politeness of staff	4.28	0.72	4.34	1.09	-0.06	6.58*
V17	Attentiveness of staff	4.20	0.86	4.28	0.91	-0.08	4.31*
V18	Staff greeting customers	4.31	1.05	4.36	0.79	-0.05	8.21*
V19	Efficient service	4.10	1.01	4.14	0.65	-0.04	7.20*
V20	Management presence	3.96	0.96	4.07	0.62	-0.11	6.06*
V21	Staff have food and beverage knowledge	4.02	0.90	4.31	0.64	-0.29	4.59*
V22	Sympathetic handling of complaints	4.09	0.91	4.18	0.86	-0.09	8.22*
V23	Overall quality of service	4.24	0.89	4.28	0.64	-0.04	6.84*
	<b>Ambience</b>						
V24	Attractiveness of exterior appearance	4.09	0.71	4.13	0.93	-0.04	6.91*
V25	Attractiveness of interior decor'	4.02	0.89	4.09	0.71	-0.07	7.03*
V26	Subdued lighting	4.10	1.04	4.19	0.67	-0.09	9.24*
V27	Comfortable temperature	4.09	0.99	4.15	0.85	-0.06	5.34*
V28	Desirable level of noise	4.02	0.95	4.10	1.08	-0.08	4.29*
V29	Rational music	4.03	1.01	4.06	0.93	-0.03	2.33
V30	Pleasant odours	2.96	0.97	3.09	0.71	-0.13	6.93*
V31	Spatial layout and functionality	3.08	0.93	3.16	0.73	-0.08	4.85*
V32	Effective signs, symbols and artefacts	4.14	0.87	4.23	1.05	-0.09	9.37*
V33	Overall quality of ambience	3.98	0.94	4.04	0.72	-0.06	5.67*
V34	Overall dining experience/perceptions	4.03	0.73	4.13	0.87	-0.10	7.07*
	<b>Overall mean for 34 attributes</b>	4.10	-	4.20		-0.10	

V: Factor attribute; \* t-test (2 tailed Significance.)  $p < 0.05$ ; SD: Standard deviation  $p < 0.05$ .

Customers' experiences were measured on a five point Likert-type scale, where the higher the score, the greater the experience of customer value. The mean scores of customer experiences ranged from 2.96 to 4.38. The item with the lowest experience score was "pleasant odours" (V30), which indicates that restaurant customers had the lowest experience of customer value on odours compared to other restaurant attributes. On the other hand, the item with the highest experience score was "taste of food" (V8), which indicates that restaurant customers had the highest experience of customer value with the taste of food. The overall mean score for customer experience items was 4.10.

In the same vein of thought, the mean scores of managers' perceptions of customer value ranged from 3.09 to 4.49. The item with the lowest perception score was "pleasant odours" (V30) which indicate that restaurant managers had the lowest perception of customer value on the odours in the restaurant. On the other hand, the item with the highest perception score was "value-for-money" (V14). The overall mean score for managers' perceptions was 4.20.

The results reveal similarities to studies conducted by other authors. Bartlett and Han (2007) reported that the taste of food had the highest experience score in formal full-service. Hensley and Sulek (2007) stated that the quality of food had the strongest correlation with customers' experience in a restaurant. However, the findings deviate from Zopiatis and Pribics' (2007) study which reported 'value for money' as the highest experience score for customers. The reported differences could occur due to different sample characteristics (e.g. college students in Zopiatis and Pribic's (2007) study and customers of formal full-service restaurants in the present study), and because of the different modifications of DINESERV instrument used in each of the studies mentioned.

The narrowest gap was for the attribute "overall quality of food and beverages"

(V15). The low negative gap score imply that there was a small difference between what customers experienced as customer value and what managers perceived as customer value. Thus, this restaurant attribute was close to the expected customer value. However, the widest gap was for the item "staff have food and beverage knowledge" (V21), indicating that managers overestimated the food and beverage knowledge of their staff. Consequently, this attribute had the widest statistically significant gap which represents serious shortfalls and require significant attention of restaurant managers in terms of improving customer value.

The overall DINESERV gap was -0.10, which indicates that overall customers' experiences fell below managers' perceptions. Thus, the DINESERV gap was negative for all restaurant attributes. Therefore, managers' perceptions of customer value did not meet customers' experiences of customer value. However, a comparison of customers' experiences on customer value with their managers' perceptions on customer value, using the paired samples t-test, indicated a statistically significant difference on 29 of the 34 examined restaurant attributes. Although the narrowest gap was "overall quality of food and beverages", it was not statistically significant (Sig. 0.114). The biggest negative gap ("staff have food and beverage knowledge ") was statistically significant (Sig. 0.000).

## Conclusion

The measurement scale used in this study provides management with important insights about how well actual service performance meets customer value. The results suggest that there is a need to align management and customer perspectives to optimize customer value as delivered and experienced. Therefore, the findings contribute to the development of a value chain approach that captures the measurement of customers' experiences and managers' perceptions of customer value and help secure performance improvement in restaurants.

In this context, results may broaden the knowledge of restaurant customer value. Improving customer value in Port Elizabeth restaurants will, in turn, not only increase customer satisfaction and strengthen customer loyalty, but also improve the restaurant's reputation and generate greater revenue. Finally, the research supports the strategic objectives of the National Tourism Sector Strategy (RSA NDT, 2014) to deliver a world-class experience to consumers.

However, despite its managerial implications, the study has several limitations. The results are based on a relatively small sample size chosen from a limited geographic area and gathered during a short time period. Although it is not expected that the findings would be significantly different, it would be worthwhile to expand this research throughout the country to improve the generalizability of the results. Also, the measurement of restaurant service quality was limited to 34 restaurant attributes. Even though these attributes were included in other studies and their validity is tested, there could be other relevant restaurant attributes that are likely to influence customers' experiences and managers' perceptions about customer value. Lastly, the measurement of customer experiences and manager perceptions cannot be measured as clearly and precisely as profits (Vilares & Coelho, 2003).

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