

The Relationship Between Familiarity and Expectations

Bronwyn Higgs and Allison C. Ringer, Victoria University, Melbourne, Australia

Abstract

This study examines the effects of prior experience in the context of a cultural arts service. This is an exploratory study designed to investigate the role familiarity plays in shaping visitor expectations. A cross sectional sample of novice and experienced visitors to a major art exhibition was conducted to investigate expectations, perceptions and service quality. Although the results are inconclusive, the findings provide some support for the proposition that novices have more fragmented expectations in certain dimensions.

Introduction

Many service providers develop long-term relationships with clients where both parties accumulate experience with each other. From the consumer's point of view, familiarity with a service provider facilitates the evaluation process. As experience accrues, it has the potential to affect consumer information processing activities (Alba and Hutchinson, 1987; Hoch and Deighton, 1989). In both the service quality and the consumer research literature, it is assumed, that prior experience serves to create norms against which the consumer evaluates future purchases and consumption (Boulding, *et al.*, 1993; Spreng, MacKenzie and Olshavaksy, 1996; Teas, 1993; Teas, 1994; Woodruff, Cadote and Jenkins, 1983). There is a major gap in the literature with regard to novice consumers. This paper explores the relationship between familiarity and expectations in service encounters

Literature Review

Expectations and Perceptions

Expectations are "pre-trial beliefs" about a product or service (Boulding, *et al.*, 1993) and are an important concept because they provide the frame of reference for evaluation (Oliver, 1996). In other words, expectations represent the mental categories used by consumers in their evaluation of service performance with obvious implications for service quality.

There have been significant variations in the conceptualisation of expectations (Parasuraman, Zeithaml and Berry, 1988), in terms of what people feel they *should* be offered, rather than *would* be offered (Boulding, *et al.*, 1993; Spreng, MacKenzie and Olshavaksy, 1996) and pre-trial beliefs about a product or service and its performance at some future time (Boulding, *et al.*, 1993; Oliver, 1996; Woodruff, Cadote and Jenkins, 1983). Although the literature employs many different labels to describe expectations (Higgs, Polonsky and Hollick, 2005; Woodruff, Cadote and Jenkins, 1983), it is beyond the scope of this paper to discuss definitional problems. For the purpose of this paper, the normative expectations were employed. Normative expectations, also known as "deserved" and occasionally "desired" expectations, refer to what the consumer should expect which, in turn, is related to what is feasible and realistic for the service firm to deliver (Teas, 1993; Teas, 1994).

Prior Experience and Familiarity

There is little doubt that novices do form expectations (Bettman and Sujan, 1987; Shirai and Meyer, 1997). However, it has been argued that consumers cannot realistically form expectations about a service provider when they lack prior knowledge of the service. McGill

and Iacobucci (1992) suggested that expectations are not clearly formed and that evaluative criteria are prompted by participation in the experience itself. The ambiguous nature of novices' expectations has been labeled as "fuzzy" expectations in some literature (Ojasalo, 2000). However, much of this literature is speculative and few empirical studies have explored the precise nature of the relationship.

Some insights about the relationship between familiarity and expectations can be drawn from the few extant empirical studies. McGill and Iacobucci's (1992) study showed that novices, lacking concrete insights with regard to service attributes, move to higher levels of abstraction prior to service delivery. However, with the benefit of experiencing the service itself, consumers evaluate the minutiae of delivery processes, especially tangibles. Boulding *et al* (1993) point out that expectations are dynamic in nature and are constantly revised as experience is acquired. Yet other researchers have noted that wherever possible consumers prefer to use concrete rather than abstract evaluative criteria (Bearden and Teal, 1983; Cadote, Woodruff and Jenkins, 1987; Oliver, 1980). Thus, we would expect that novices' "fuzzy expectations" are likely to become more concrete and more realistic as a consequence of experience.

To date, the limited research on expectations has concentrated on changes in the directional movement of expectations rather than dimensional changes. Pre-experience evaluation of a service is difficult for consumers and it is often only after consumption of a service that even a superficial analysis can be made (Johnson and Mathews, 1997). A further complexity arises in pre-contact because the amount of information prior to initial purchase is typically situation and consumer-specific. This is in contrast to the second and subsequent visits to the same service provider, where the knowledge gained from the initial visit(s) provides a basis for future expectations (Higgs, Polonsky and Hollick, 2005).

Consumer inexperience is not an absolute condition, rather there are degrees of inexperience ranging from total lack of experience to partial experience with the brand or category, but no knowledge of the specific provider for a forthcoming transaction (Boulding, et al., 1993; Ojasalo, 2000). Very little is known about how novices form expectations, although it has been argued that novices have limited, albeit fragmentary information regarding a forthcoming service encounter prior to consumption (Carmen, 1990). Therefore, infrequent visitors may have relatively unsophisticated impressions of a forthcoming encounter compared to those with richer and more realistic expectations. Further, it is anticipated that novice consumers' expectations undergo major transitions as experience accrues.

Objectives

The objectives of this paper are to:

- 1) to explore the role familiarity performs in shaping novice consumers' expectations;
- 2) to compare the dimensions of expectations for both novice and experienced consumers

Research Methodology

The sample

Visitors to a major travelling art exhibition were personally interviewed. An art museum staging a major international exhibition was selected for this study because it attracts large numbers of "novice" patrons as well as regular patrons over a concentrated time frame.

Galleries are also venues that make for convenient identification of prospective patrons. It must be noted that to qualify for inclusion in the sample, respondents could have prior experience with the venue but not have previously attended the focal exhibition. The total sample size was 251.

The survey instrument and operational measures

The survey instrument, ARTSQUAL, is a modified version of SERVQUAL, adapted for the cultural arts industry. Only 11 items were original to SERVQUAL, with the balance being arts industry specific. Such modifications have become conventional practice (Oliver, 1996). The revised instrument was based on a review of the arts literature (Kotler and Kotler, 1998), discussions with Gallery management as well as a pilot test. The survey instrument also included an item on visitors' prior experience with major art exhibitions. This enabled us to identify two sub-samples; experienced visitors who had attended at least one art exhibition prior to this focal exhibition and novices who had never attended any major art exhibition.

Discussion of Results

Separate analysis of the two sub-samples was carried out to ensure that two conditions were met. It was essential that both were representative of the Gallery's visitor profile and that both were demographically similar in terms of age, gender and family status. Due to space constraints, this analysis is not reported here. However, it should be noted that, with the exception of age, the two sub-samples were assumed to be demographically similar. It is reasonable, therefore, to infer that any observed differences between the two groups cannot be explained by demographic factors.

Quantitative analysis, included comparison of means with a Bonferroni adjustment. Table 1 summarises statistical differences between the two groups.

Sub Sample	Expectations			Perceptions			Service Quality		
	Number of Factors	Mean	SD	Number of Factors	Mean	SD	Number of Factors	Mean	SD
Novices (n = 69)	5	4.35	0.43	6	3.81*	0.48	6	-0.56*	0.50
Experienced Visitors (n = 182)	4	4.49	0.45	4	4.00*	0.51	5	-0.39*	0.54

* Significant at p=0.05

Although novices had slightly lower mean expectations, the difference between groups was not significant. Significant differences, however were noted in perception and service quality scores for the two groups. Closer inspection of expectations items revealed significant differences on three of the items, namely lighting (item 3), the provision of background information on the artist (item 13) and the curator's interpretation of the collection (item 15), however the Bonferroni adjustment suggests that these may have occurred by chance. Overall, this quantitative analysis suggests that there are no statistical differences between novices and experienced users in relation to their mean expectations.

Qualitative analysis centred on factor analysis to reveal the underlying dimensions of expectations. Factor structures for both groups are summarised in Tables 2 and 3. It is worth noting that novices' expectations loaded onto five factors compared with experienced visitors which only yielded four. That novices employ a greater number of mental categories to organise their expectations suggests that these expectations are somewhat more fragmented.

Given that the factor structures are thought to represent the cognitive categories used by consumers to evaluate service encounters, it is useful to force labels for the derived factors. Labelling was complicated due to overlapping categories, however, labels that broadly reflected composition were selected. The same label name was only used when two factors shared at least 50 percent of items.

Novice and experienced visitors' evaluation categories appear to be qualitatively different. Some factors exhibit relative inter-group consistency. Both groups identify the art exhibition and tangibles as distinct mental categories. On the other hand, novices tended to group items associated with access and convenience as a distinct category, one that had no parallel among experienced visitors. In addition, access and convenience attracted higher rankings among the novice group suggesting that these issues present a particular concern during the pre-experience phase.

Limitations and Future Research

A major limitation of this study rests with the use of SERVQUAL and its administration. The traditional administration of the SERVQUAL instrument requires that respondents recall their expectations when interviewed in the post experience phase. However, the dynamic nature of expectations with its implication that categories are not fixed means casts serious doubts about the instrument's ability to capture true expectations. In future research, it may be worthwhile using focus groups to identify the expectation items rather than force the SERVQUAL items.

Conclusions

This study, although exploratory in nature, contributes to an understanding the relationship between familiarity and expectations. In summary, novices' expectations are more fragmentary and complex than those of experienced users.

Major art exhibitions are blockbuster events. Although novices may not possess realistic expectations of the art exhibition, they may share certain expectations with their experienced counterparts by drawing on similar experiences from different contexts. Some aspects of service delivery, such as ticketing, queuing and souvenir shops, are almost universal. Most clients have experienced the frustration of the queue, albeit not in a cultural arts context. However, the art exhibition and the interpretative signage that surrounds it, constitutes the unique aspects of an art museum service offering and as expected, it is in this sphere that novices show significant differences to their experienced counterparts.

Item Number & Brief Description/ Component		1	2	3	4	5
Variance Explained (63.7%)		33.6	8.8	7.9	7.02	6.3
Access & Convenience	13 Gallery Inspires Feelings of Safety	0.730				
	11 Employees' Willingness to Help	0.691				
	14 Ease of Movement (Traffic/ Congestion)	0.639				
	12 Employees Instil Confidence	0.569				
	10 Gallery Provides Prompt Service	0.561				
	6 Gallery Able to Solve Visitor Problems	0.336				
Art Exhibition	19 Interpretation of Art Collection		0.664			
	15 Background Information on Artist		0.619			
	5 Appropriate Lighting		0.503			
	9 Authenticity of Artworks Documented		0.479			
Timeliness & Understanding	16 Convenient Operating Hours			0.767		
	18 Waiting Lines (Queues)			0.683		
	17 Gallery Understands Visitor Needs			0.583		
Credibility	7 Services Delivered on Time				0.835	
	8 Display of Advertised Artworks				0.752	
Tangibles	4 Range of Souvenirs					0.781
	3 Range of Food and Beverages					0.691
	2 Employees' Neat Appearance					0.592
	1 Facilities' Appearance					0.492

Item Number & Brief Description/ Component		1	2	3	4
Variance Explained (55%)		36.2	9.0	7.3	5.5
Service Operations	10 Gallery Provides Prompt Service	0.829			
	7 Services Delivered on Time	0.788			
	6 Gallery Able to Solve Visitor Problems	0.778			
	11 Employees' Willingness to Help	0.716			
	17 Gallery Understands Visitor Needs	0.554			
	9 Authenticity of Artworks Documented	0.474			
	18 Waiting Lines (Queues)	0.444			
Art Exhibition	15 Background Information on Artist		0.804		
	16 Convenient Operating Hours		0.729		
	5 Appropriate Lighting		0.619		
	19 Interpretation of Art Collection		0.592		
	8 Display of Advertised Artworks		0.411		
Assurance	14 Ease of movement (Traffic/ Congestion)			0.735	
	13 Gallery Inspires Feelings of Safety			0.665	
	12 Employees Instil Confidence			0.557	
Tangibles	4 Range of Souvenirs				0.757
	3 Range of Food and Beverages				0.682
	2 Employees' Neat Appearance				0.624
	1 Facilities' Appearance				0.556

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