

## **Service Quality Assessment of Food-Based Superstores**

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### **Abstract**

Retailing in India is receiving global recognition and attention, and this emerging market is witnessing a significant change in its growth and investment pattern. With greater choice and increasing awareness, Indian consumers are more demanding of quality service and retailers can no longer afford to neglect customer service issues. The present research was undertaken with the objectives to evaluate quality of service offered by selected food based superstores. The study was conducted by selecting eight food-based superstores on judgment basis and a sample of 25 customers was selected from each superstore i.e. total 200 customers were selected. Primary data was collected from these customers through structured, non disguised questionnaires. The Retail Service Quality Scale (RSQS) was used to collect data relating to various parameters of service quality assessment of retail store like physical aspects, reliability, personal interaction, problem solving and store policy. It was found that there was maximum gap for the parameter problem solving (-1.40) and least gap was found for the parameter physical aspects (-1.04). The overall gap was found negative for all parameters which indicate that the service quality of retail stores is not meeting the expectation of customers.

### **Key Words**

Service Quality, Expectation, Perception, Food-based Superstore.

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### **INTRODUCTION**

The retail environment is changing more rapidly than ever before. It is characterized by intense competition from both domestic and foreign companies, a spate of mergers and acquisitions, and more sophisticated and demanding customers who have greater expectations related to their consumption experiences.

Consequently, retailers today must differentiate themselves by meeting the needs of their customers better than the competition. It is not just the global players like Wal-Mart, Tesco and Metro group who are vying to capture a pie of this market but also the domestic corporate behemoths like Reliance, KK Modi, Aditya Birla group, and Bharti group too are at some stage of retail development. With greater choice and increasing awareness, Indian consumers are more demanding of quality service and retailers can no longer afford to neglect customer service issues. Service quality is perceived as a tool to increase value for the consumer, as a means of positioning in a competitive environment and to ensure consumer satisfaction retention and patronage.

### **FOOD RETAIL IN INDIA**

Retailing, one of the largest sectors in the global economy, is going through a transition phase in India. For a long time, the corner grocery store was the only choice available to the consumer, especially in the urban areas. This is slowly giving way to international formats of retailing. The traditional food and grocery segment has seen the emergence of supermarkets/grocery chains, convenience stores and fast-food chains. To be successful in food retailing in India essentially, means to draw away shoppers from the roadside hawkers and kirana stores to supermarkets. This transition can be achieved to some extent through pricing, so the success of a food retailer depends on how best he understands and squeezes his supply chain. Food and grocery retailing is a tough business in India with margins being very low, and consumers not dissatisfied with existing shops where they buy. For example, the next-door grocery shopkeeper is smart and delivers good customer service, though not value. Almost all food retail players have been region-specific as far as geographical presence is concerned in the country.

It can be observed that the most popular retail format in India is the 'supermarket', beside the corner shop/grocery store/'mom and pop' store. Hypermarkets have very recently come into being and are negligible in number though most retail chains do intend to expand their presence through this format as well. 'Discount chains' are also substantial in number and are growing at a fast pace through the country, predominantly in the southern region.

### **FOOD-BASED SUPERSTORES**

There are various retail formats followed by the retail chains These are: Department Stores, Specialty Stores, Discount Stores, Convenience Stores and

Food-Based Superstores. Food-Based Superstores are large, low cost, low margin, high volume, self-service operations designed to meet the needs for food, groceries and other non-food items. This format was at the forefront of the grocery revolution, and today, it controls more than 30% of the grocery market in many countries. The most widely used definition of superstore is a store with a selling area between 400sq m and 2500 sqm, selling at least 70% foodstuffs and everyday commodities, (Pradhan, 2008). Internationally, the size of these stores varies from 8000 to 20000 square feet. ASDA, Safeway, Kroger and Teso are some of the large international players. While there is no standardisation on the parameters of what makes a supermarket in India, it is one of the fastest growing business formats in the country. Examples of supermarkets in the Indian market scenario are Nilgiri's Foodworld, Subiksha, Food Bazaar and Vitan (Maurya, 2009).

### **SERVICE QUALITY**

Service quality is defined as the difference between perceptions and expectations on the items representing the areas of performance specific to a service. Service quality is a critical factor for service firms to position themselves strongly in a competitive environment. Gronroos (1984) discussed the 'technical quality of service encounters, that is, what is received by the customer, and the 'functional quality' of the process, that is, the way in which the services are delivered, in relation to staff. It was found that a customers' assessment of overall service quality depends on the gap between expectation and perception of actual performance levels, (Parsuraman, 1985). Bolton and Drew (1991) developed a model of how customers with prior experiences and expectations assess service performance levels, overall service quality and service values. It was later reported that behavioural consequences of service quality act as intervening variables between service qualities and financial gains or losses from retention or defection. Service quality is a determinant of whether a customer ultimately remains with or defects from accompany, (Zeithaml et al., 1996).

Research studies focused on that part of retail service that involves direct interactivity between the store and the customer and suggested that the recent wave of superstores has ushered in a new paradigm of retail service, i.e., one with elevated emphasis on self-service principles, (Merrilees and Miller, 2001). Stewart (2003) addressed the issue of service design specifically that of designing the service encounter for improved quality. Arora and Vyas (2006) examined that today smart retailers can make affordable immediate changes: yet realize very meaningful incremental gains in effective store performance from the backroom of the store

operation. With a large number of malls in pipeline in India, one of the critical factors that will give an edge to one retailer center over the others is the way it is managed, (Zammer, 2006). Stuart (2007) suggested three things for running a retail store efficiently i.e., improving the product, improving the store and improving the service. Ladhari (2008) identified the key conceptual and empirical issues that should be considered in the development of alternative industry-specific measurement scales of service quality.

### RETAIL SERVICE QUALITY SCALE (RSQS)

The Retail Service Quality Scale (RSQS) is used to measure the service quality of a retail store. (Dhabolkar *et al.*, 1996). The scale has high construct reliability and validity in measuring service quality in department stores. These service quality dimensions and their sub dimensions are rated at 5 point scale for expectation and perception. The gap in service quality pertaining to specific areas is found out by finding the differences in perception and expectation.

The service quality is measured on the following parameters :

1. **Physical Aspects** : It has six sub-dimensions. It encompasses the appearance of the physical facilities and the convenience offered to the customer by the layout of the physical facilities.
2. **Reliability** : It has five sub-dimensions. Customers view reliability as a combination of keeping promises.
3. **Personal Interaction** : It has nine sub-dimensions. It evaluates whether store personnel are courteous, helpful, and inspire confidence in customers and capture how customer is treated by the employee.
4. **Problem Solving** : It has three sub-dimensions. It addresses the handling of returns and exchanges as well as of complaints.
5. **Policy** : It has five sub-dimensions. It captures aspects of service quality that are directly influenced by organization policy.

### OBJECTIVES OF THE STUDY

Given the increasing competition, retailers can no longer afford to neglect customer service issues. Consumers have become more selective in their choice of stores. Smaller stores provide more personal services but with inadequate stocks and facilities; a contrast to the larger retailers which are seen as offering better merchandise choice and public amenities but with standardized and non-personalized services. As superstores offer similar products in the store, improving service quality is seen as critical to ensure customer loyalty. Perception of high service quality and

high customer satisfaction generally leads to higher levels of purchase intentions and repeat buying. The present study was undertaken with the following specific objective :

***To evaluate quality of service offered by selected food based superstores in Ludhiana city.***

## RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

A research design was formulated which guided the collection and analysis of data. The population for the study consists of all the customers of food-based superstores in Ludhiana city. A sample size of 200 customers was selected on the basis of Quota sampling technique. In the first stage, 8 food-based superstores were selected on judgment basis. Those stores which qualified the definition of food-based superstores were selected for the study. Food-Based Superstores are large, low cost, low margin, high volume, self-service operations designed to meet the needs for food, groceries and other non food items, (Pradhan, 2008). Efforts were made to select each retail store from a different Company/Corporate Group. In the second stage, 25 customers from each store were selected on convenience basis.

The primary data was collected with the help of a structured, non-disguised questionnaire. An adopted Service Quality of Retail Store model given by Dabholkar, Thorpe and Rentz (Dhabolkar *et al.*, 1996) was used for the study. Data was collected relating to various parameters of service quality assessment of retail stores like physical aspects, reliability, personal interaction, problem solving and store policy on merchandise quality, parking, operation hours, credit cards etc. The Retail Service Quality Scale requires the respondent to rate the 28 items on scale from 1 to 5 twice. First to indicate their expectations and next to give their perception of the actual service provided. Further, the difference between the customers' expectation and perception of the service received gives the service quality gap.

The collected data was tabulated and analyzed using various statistical tools like percentage, mean scores, single mean z-test and two means z-test. Two means z-test was used to test the significance of difference between two population means at 5% level of significance. z-value was calculated by the following formula.

$$z = \frac{(\bar{X}_1 - \bar{X}_2)}{\sigma / \sqrt{n}}$$

Where,

$\bar{X}_1$  and  $\bar{X}_2$  denote the independent random sample means based on size  $n_1$  and  $n_2$  respectively.

$\sigma$  = standard deviation

**FINDINGS OF THE STUDY**

The findings of the study have been discussed below :

**Demographic Profile of the Respondents**

This section analyses the data collected from the respondents relating to demographic attributes i.e. age, gender, gross annual family income and occupation.

**Table 1**  
**Demographic Profile of Respondents**

Parameters	No. of Respondents	Percentage (%)
<b>Gender</b>		
Male	54	27
Female	146	73
<b>Total</b>	<b>200</b>	<b>100</b>
<b>Age (in yrs.)</b>		
<20	24	12
20-29	20	10
30-39	142	71
40-49	11	5.5
>49	3	1.5
<b>Total</b>	<b>200</b>	<b>100</b>
<b>Gross Annual Family Income (Rs. in Laacs)</b>		
<1	4	2
1-2	22	11
2-3	63	31.5
3-4	79	39.5
>4	32	16
<b>Total</b>	<b>200</b>	<b>100</b>
<b>Occupation</b>		
Student	18	9
Service	66	33
Businessmen	74	37
Professional	40	20
Retired	2	1
<b>Total</b>	<b>200</b>	<b>100</b>

Table 1 shows that 73% respondents were females and 27% were males and 71% respondents fall in the age group of 30-39 years. Further, 39.5% respondents have annual family income between 3-4 lacs and 31.5% have between 2-3 lacs. The table also shows that 37% respondents are from business family and 33% are from service family..

### Frequency of Visit of Respondents to Food-base Superstores

The respondents were asked how often they shopped at the food-based superstore.

Majority of the respondents i.e. 36% go for shopping once a fortnight to food-based superstores and 27% respondents go once a week and 20% respondents shop once a month. Only 9% respondents go more than once a week.

**Table 2**

#### Frequency of Visit of Respondents to Food-based Superstore

Frequency of Visit	No. of Respondent	Percentage
More than once a week	18	9
Once a week	54	27
Once a fortnight	72	36
Once a month	40	20
Less than once a month	16	8
Total	200	100

### Source of Information about Food-based Superstores

Respondents were asked about the source from where they came to know about food-based superstore.

**Table 3**

#### Source of Information about Food-based Superstores

Source of Information	No. of Respondent	Percentage
Print Advertisement (Newspaper/ Printed material)	74	37
Friends and Relatives	48	24
Hoardings	42	21
Broadcast advertising	36	18
<b>Total</b>	<b>200</b>	<b>100</b>

Table 3 shows that majority of respondents i.e. 37% receive the information about food-based superstore from print advertising, 24% replied that they come to know about the food-based superstore from their friends and relative and 21% got information from hoardings.

### **Factors Affecting Preference of Food-based Superstores**

To ascertain the attributes which are considered more important while choosing food-based superstore, the respondents were asked to indicate the attributes which they considered important while selecting superstore on a scale from 1 to 5 where 1 stands least important and 5 stands most important.

**Table 4**  
**Factors Affecting Preference for Food-based Superstore (N=200)**

<b>Factors</b>	<b>Mean score</b>	<b>Standard Deviation</b>	<b>z-value</b>
Convenient location	4.27	0.73	62.98*
Reasonable price	4.24	0.77	22.92*
More choices of product	4.10	0.90	17.35*
Visual merchandising	3.47	0.70	49.74*
Good store image	3.33	1.00	4.65*
Good store design	3.32	0.67	6.66*
Convenient parking	3.19	0.73	3.70*
Its privileges to the cardholder	2.33	0.66	14.37*

\*Significant at 5% level of significance (z table = 1.96)

It was found that the factors convenient location (4.27), reasonable price (4.24) and more choice of product (4.10) are found to affect the preference of food-based superstore while privilege to card holder (2.33) least affected preference of food-based superstore. Standard deviation for good store image was found to be the highest (1.00) and privilege to card holder was least (0.66). The z-values were calculated was tested at 5% significant level. For all the factors, z-values were found to be significant which means that all these factors significantly affect the preference of food-based superstores.

### **Expenditure on Each Shopping Experience**

Respondents were asked about their expenditure on each shopping experience.



**Table 5**  
**Frequency Distribution of Expenditure on each Shopping Experience**

Expenditure/ visit	No. of Respondent	Percentage
Less than Rs100	54	27
Rs100-Rs500	102	51
Rs500-Rs1000	28	14
More than Rs1000	16	8
<b>Total</b>	<b>200</b>	<b>100</b>

Table 5 shows that 59% of respondents spent within the range of Rs 100- Rs 500 and 27% respondents spent less than Rs 100 per visit. Only 8% respondent spent more than Rs 1000 per visit.

#### **Service Quality Assessment of Superstores**

Service Quality of food-based superstores was assessed on five dimensions of service quality by using Retail Service Quality Scale (Dhabolkar *et al.*, 1996). The service quality is measured on five dimensions i.e. physical aspects, reliability, personal interaction problem solving and store policy. These five dimensions were further divided into sub dimensions as given below.

#### **Physical Aspects**

Physical aspects refer to the physical appearance of store and layout convenience. Physical environment is often used as cues of a firm's competences and quality by consumers before a purchase. Physical environment has a deep impact on customers' perception of service experiences.

The respondents were asked to rate their expectation and perception on scale of 1 to 5 where 1 stands for least important and 5 as most important.

**Table 6**  
**Service Quality Gap for the Physical Aspects (N=200)**

Statements Relating to the Dimension Physical Aspects	Actual Service Received (P) Mean Score	Expected Service (E) Mean Score	(P-E)	z-value
This store has modern-looking equipment and fixtures.	3.29	4.46	-1.17	14.63*
The physical facilities at this store are visually appealing.	3.3	4.42	-1.12	10.49*
Materials associated with this store's service are visually appealing (shopping bags, catalogs etc.)	3.28	4.31	-1.03	12.02*
This store has clean, attractive, and convenient public areas (rest rooms, fitting rooms)	3.44	4.34	-0.9	10.50*
The store layout at this store makes it easy for customers to find what they need	3.30	4.42	-1.12	14.17*
The store layout at this store makes it easy for customers to move around in the store	3.23	4.39	-1.16	14.05*
<b>Overall</b>	<b>3.31</b>	<b>4.35</b>	<b>-1.04</b>	

\*Significant at 5% level of significance (z table = 1.96)

From the Table 6 it is clear that the difference between the mean scores for expectations and that for actual experience is the least (-0.9) for the statement that store has clean, attractive, and convenient public areas. The greatest difference (-1.17) has come up for the statement that store has modern-looking equipment and fixtures. The overall mean score for difference from the parameter 'Physical Aspects' comes out to be -1.04. The negative sign shows that expectations are higher than perception. All the calculated z-values come out to be greater than z-value (1.96) at 5% significance level. So it can be said that there is a significant difference between expectations and actual experience.

### Reliability

The reliability dimension comprise of "promises" and "doing it right" sub-dimensions. Besides fulfilling promise and performing the right service as part of

reliability, the availability of merchandise is also added as part of the "doing it right" sub-dimension.

The respondents were asked to rate their expectation and perception on scale of 1 to 5 where 1 stands for least important and 5 as most important.

**Table 7**  
**Service Quality Gap for the Reliability (N=200)**

Statements Relating to the Dimension Reliability	Actual Service Received (P) Mean Score	Expected Service (E) Mean Score	(P-E)	z-value
When this store promises to do something by a certain time, it will do so	3.08	4.45	-1.37	18.39*
This store provides its services at the time it promises to do so	3.11	4.37	-1.26	20.00*
This store performs the services right the first time	3.06	4.34	-1.28	17.85*
This store has merchandise available when the customers want it	3.29	4.33	-1.04	14.32*
This store insists on error-free sales transactions and record	3.37	4.42	-1.05	-25.04*
<b>Overall</b>	<b>3.18</b>	<b>4.38</b>	<b>-1.20</b>	

\*Significant at 5% level of significance (z table = 1.96)

From Table 7 it is clear that the difference between the mean scores for expectations and that for actual experience is the least (-1.04) for merchandise availability. It means that customers get the merchandise when they want. The greatest difference (-1.37) has come up for the store promise to do something by a certain time. It shows that stores are not able to keep their promise to do something by certain time. The overall mean score for difference from the parameter 'Reliability' comes out to be -1.20. Negative sign shows that expectation is higher than perception for reliability. All the calculated z-values come out to be greater than the z-value (1.96) at 5% significance level. So it can be said that there is a significant difference between expectations and actual experience.

### **Personal Interaction**

Personal interaction means that store personnel are courteous, helpful, and inspire confidence in customers. Personal interaction was subdivided into 9 statements

which were rated on scale from 1 to 5 for expectation and perception.

The respondents were asked to rate their expectation and perception on scale of 1 to 5 where 1 stands for least important and 5 as most important.

**Table 8**  
**Service Quality Gap for Personal Interaction (N=200)**

Statements Relating to the Dimension Personal Interaction	Actual Service Received (P) Mean Score	Expected Service (E) Mean Score	(P-E)	z-value
Employees in this store have the knowledge to answer customers' questions	3.23	4.30	-1.07	14.16*
The behaviour of the employees in this store instills confidence in customers	3.19	4.12	-0.93	11.78*
Customers feel safe in their transactions with this store	3.11	4.35	-1.24	16.67*
Employees in this store give prompt service to customers	3.19	4.37	-1.18	17.39*
Employees in this store tell customers exactly when service will be performed	3.20	4.38	-1.18	16.80*
Employees in this store are never too busy to respond to customer's requests	3.12	4.45	-1.33	19.75*
This store gives customers individual attention	3.06	4.32	-1.26	16.74*
Employees in this store are consistently courteous with customers	3.10	4.35	-1.25	17.79*
Employees in this store treat customers courteously on the telephone	3.09	4.28	-1.19	16.73*
<b>Overall</b>	<b>3.14</b>	<b>4.32</b>	<b>-1.18</b>	

\*Significant at 5% level of significance (z table = 1.96)

From Table 8 it is clear that the difference between the mean scores for expectations and that for actual experience is the least (-0.93) for the statement that the behaviour of the employees in this store instils confidence in customers. The greatest difference (-1.33) has come up for the statement that the employees in store are never too busy to respond to customer's requests. The overall mean score for difference from the parameter 'Personal Interaction' comes out to be -1.18. All the

calculated z-values come out to be greater than the z-value (1.96) at 5% significance level. So it can be said that there is a significant difference between expectations and actual experience.

### Problem Solving

Problem solving incorporates store's willingness to handle returns and exchanges, shows a sincere interest in solving customers' problems, and also store personnel's ability to handle customer complaints directly and immediately.

The respondents were asked to rate their expectation and perception on scale of 1 to 5 where 1 stands for least important and 5 as most important.

**Table 7**

**Service Quality Gap for Problem Solving (N = 200)**

Statements Relating to the Dimension Problem Solving	Actual Service Received (P) Mean Score	Expected Service (E) Mean Score	(P-E)	z-value
This store willingly handles returns and exchanges	2.74	4.41	-1.67	24.31*
When a customer has a problem, this store shows a sincere interest in solving it	3.09	4.36	-1.27	17.32*
Employees in this store are able to handle customer complaints directly & immediately	3.10	4.34	-1.24	18.02*
<b>Overall</b>	<b>2.97</b>	<b>4.37</b>	<b>-1.40</b>	

\*Significant at 5% level of significance (z table = 1.96)

From Table 9 it is clear that the difference between the mean scores for expectations and that for actual experience is quite high for all the statements. The least difference (-1.24) is for the statement that employees of store are able to handle customer complaints directly & immediately. The greatest difference (-1.67) has come up for the statement that store willingly handles returns and exchanges. The overall mean score for difference from the dimension 'Problem solving' comes out to be -1.40 which is very high on a scale of 5. All the calculated z-values come out to be greater than the table z-value (1.96) at 5% significance level. So it can be said that there is a significant difference between expectations and actual experience.

### Store Policy

Store policy includes high quality merchandise, parking facilities, convenient operating hours, acceptance of major credit cards, and store's own credit card.

The respondents were asked to rate their expectation and perception on scale of 1 to 5 where 1 stands for least important and 5 as most important.

**Table 10**  
**Service Quality Gap for Store Policy (N=200)**

Statements Relating to the Dimension Store Policy	Actual Service Received (P) Mean Score	Expected Service (E) Mean Score	(P-E)	z-value
This store offers high quality merchandise	3.36	4.49	-1.13	16.11*
This store provides plenty of convenient parking for customers	3.19	4.43	-1.24	16.12*
This store has operating hours convenient to all their customers	3.31	4.47	-1.16	16.19*
This store accepts most major credit cards	3.18	3.84	-0.66	7.90*
This store offers its own credit card	1.70	3.67	-1.97	27.03*
<b>Overall</b>	<b>2.94</b>	<b>4.18</b>	<b>-1.24</b>	

\*Significant at 5% level of significance (z table = 1.96)

From Table 10 it is clear that the difference between the mean scores for expectations and that for actual experience is the least (-0.66) for the statement that store accepts most major credit cards. The greatest difference (-1.97) has come up for the statement that store offers its own credit card. The overall mean score for difference from the dimension 'Store Policy' comes out to be -1.24, which is high on a scale of 5. All the calculated z-values come out to be greater than the table z-value (1.96) at 5% significance level. So it can be said that there is a significant difference between expectations and actual experience.

### Overall Service Quality Assessment of Food-based Superstores

Overall assessment of service quality was calculated by calculating the gap between expectations and perceptions of five dimensions of service quality i.e. physical aspects, reliability, personal interaction, problem solving and store policy.

The respondents were asked to rate their expectation and perception on scale of 1 to 5 where 1 stands for least important and 5 as most important.

**Table 11**

**Overall Assessment of Service Quality of Food-based Superstores (N=200)**

Dimensions	Actual Service Received (P) Mean Score	Expected Service (E) Mean Score	RSQS Score (P-E)	Rank
Physical aspects	3.31	4.35	-1.04	V
Reliability	3.18	4.38	-1.20	III
Personal interaction	3.14	4.32	-1.18	IV
Problem solving	2.97	4.37	-1.40	I
Store policy	2.94	4.18	-1.24	II

The overall gap for each dimension comes out to be negative which shows that expectation for each service dimension is higher than perception. Mean analysis is done which shows that maximum gap between perception and expectation is (-1.40) for problem solving while least gap was (-1.04) for physical aspects. This shows that the stores must concentrate on reducing the gap between expectation and perception in the dimension problem solving, store policy and personal interaction. Comparing the perceived performance and expectation level reveals that the perceived performance on all dimensions fell short of their expectations. This indicates that the service quality offered did not meet their customers' expectations on all aspects.

## CONCLUSION

There is a boom in the retail industry. A number of retail stores are coming up in all major cities. It is one of the largest sectors in the global economy and is going through a transition phase in India. Today customers have become very intelligent and he is not ready to compromise on quality. Therefore, quality service has become a source of competitive advantage and increasingly important weapon in business survival. Thus, it is important to assess the service quality of retail stores. The study revealed that the service quality offered did not meet the customers' expectations on most aspects. The maximum gap between perception and expectation was (-1.39) for problem solving while least gap was (-1.04) for physical aspects. So there is need for improving service quality by concentrating on reducing the gap between expectation and perception in the dimensions- problem solving, store policy and personal interaction.

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